WHEN THE WORLD SLEEPS

STORIES, WORDS AND WOUNDS OF PALESTINE

FRANCESCA ALBANESE

Translated from the Italian by Gregory Conti

WHEN THE WORLD SLEEPS

For the first time, I feel truly outraged.

Outraged by the indifference.

The violence of this genocide, the way it entered our daily lives

and the knowledge that some are not affected at all,

while others were devastated.

To think that I find myself once again faced with officials from countries who – all together and some more than others – could stop all this.

A stroke of the pen would be enough.

I feel outraged and disappointed,

as often happens to me in this room,

seeing many of you continue to recite the same script.

We naturally condemn the Hamas attack.

We naturally express our solidarity with the Israeli victims.

Naturally, we demand the release of the hostages.

But is it possible that after the killing of forty-two thousand people in Gaza

Is there still anyone who cannot empathize with the Palestinians?

Here: who among you today hasn't said even a word about what is happening in Gaza

It shows that empathy has vanished from this room.

Empathy is the glue that holds us together as humanity.

And it's not a question of charity towards the Palestinians.

It's a question of respecting your functions, which also

entails the obligation for your States to firmly guarantee

the application of the Genocide Convention
to prevent this crime.

And so, if it is true that today we are here with the intention of honoring the right international,

there is no other way than to impose sanctions on Israel,
reviewing the diplomatic, economic, political, military and
strategic ties we maintain with this State.

And may this be the last genocide in human history.

Francesca Albanese, excerpts from her speech at the UN General Assembly, 30 October 2024

Introduction ***Is solidarity a political declination of love?***

> I became a refugee at the age of ten. In my childish mind I wondered about invisible enemy that was destroying my life. What did he look like? Was he a human being or a beast? Why had he made me a refugee? What had I done to him? Where did he come from? What language did he speak?
>
> SALMAN ABU SITTA, ***The Map of My Return***

Lately, I've found myself thinking about Orwell often. His famous proclamation, "War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength," has never seemed more timely and pertinent than in the recent debate on Israel and Palestine.

Many, for example, continue to refer to what is happening in Gaza as a "conflict." Or, even worse, as a conflict that began on October 7, 2023. This reading displays all the superficiality of someone who begins a book halfway, ignoring many pages that contain vivid traces of blood and pain: a story that actually has roots much deeper than that and continues to remain ignored.

Just as the call for justice that the Palestinian people have been supporting for almost a century remains ignored and deaf, for the apartheid regime that has oppressed them for generations and the absurd torment of what has been happening since the end of 2023 and continues to happen even after the supposed ceasefire between January and March 2025: a full-blown genocide.

The horror in Gaza is unprecedented. When I say that Israel is writing one of the darkest pages in history, comparable to the genocides of the past, many respond that we don't know for sure yet, that we have to wait for the verdict of the International Court of Justice. But

The Court—the body responsible for settling disputes between states and providing advisory opinions on matters of international law—already affirmed the risk of genocide in January 2024, ordering states to take action to halt Israel's genocidal acts. Many countries, however, appear to fail to understand this, or are deliberately ignoring it. The international treaty is called the Convention on the ***Prevention*** and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: how can states prevent it if not by acting promptly when the risk arises (as the Court of Justice affirms)?

And even leaving aside the legal aspect, how is it possible not to speak out in the face of such ruthless atrocities?

When I was in Berlin in May 2024, a few weeks after presenting the report "Anatomy of a Genocide" to the UN, I was still a dissenting voice in denouncing Israel's ongoing crimes in Gaza in these terms. Aside from the pending case initiated by the South African government at the International Court of Justice in December 2023, alleging that Israel was committing acts of genocide against the Palestinian population in Gaza, there was virtually no other literature on the subject.

Some prominent scholars, such as historian Raz Segal, had spoken about it immediately after October 7, but they were isolated voices. Another well-known Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, had already denounced Israeli practices in the Gaza Strip as an ***incremental genocide in 2006:*** a genocide that gradually worsens in violence and intensity.

Yet within the United Nations, no one dared utter that forbidden word about Israel. No one except me and a few other UN Rapporteurs, especially those from countries in the Global Majority (or Global South), many of whom still bear the trauma of colonization and the genocides Europeans perpetrated over half a millennium, from Latin America to Africa to Asia.

"Anatomy of a Genocide" was the first report to provide the United Nations with a detailed denunciation of the fact that Israeli military operations in the Strip revealed an intention to annihilate Gaza as such, to destroy everything. In Berlin, where I was scheduled to attend a series of meetings and conferences, I was greeted with great interest by civil society and the German think tank community.

Less than a year later, the reception in Germany for a new round of public events has been very different. Today, many voices support my interpretation of the events and their legal characterization as genocide, illegal occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid, among other crimes attributable to the State of Israel. However, the repression against the message I bring, my work, and my person has grown unprecedented, as has the intolerance in the debate on the Israeli-Palestinian question. So, what has changed?

Just before arriving in Germany, in February 2025, the two university events I was scheduled to attend in the country were canceled under political pressure. The first—a lecture at the University of Munich—was canceled immediately. However, thanks to the students, I was still able to hold the lecture at a refugee reception center that is not government-run, but privately funded and has a courageous director who resisted the pressure.

I was also supposed to give a lecture at the University of Berlin together with Eyal Weizman, an Israeli expert in forensic architecture, but by the time we arrived, the university had already canceled the public event.
They proposed holding it behind closed doors, but we refused; it wouldn't have made sense to travel all the way there to hold a meeting that could only be followed online. Some professors and students managed to move the event to a cultural center that could accommodate up to six hundred people (even though there were already twelve hundred registered at that point). However, the Israeli ambassador, the police, several politicians, a minister, and other institutional figures applied further pressure: after pushing the university to cancel the conference, they threatened to revoke the cultural center's funding if it actually agreed to host the event. Faced with the risk of having to close due to a lack of funding, the center caved in; only to find, the next morning, its walls defaced with graffiti from the usual pro-Israel groups: ALBANIAN ANTI-SEMITIC, ALBANIAN TERRORIST, along with insults against me and the United Nations.

In the end, the event was held anyway, but at the headquarters of the newspaper "Junge Welt," where there was only room for a hundred people. Outside, huge crowds were crowded together. Meanwhile, the police had surrounded the building with officers in

riot gear, with truncheons and machine guns in full view: it is in this context that Eyal Weizman and I spoke of peace for a suffering people.

In Germany, as in other parts of Europe and increasingly shamelessly in the United States, repression has taken on extremely violent tones. In recent months, I have read many times about police attacks on students and those protesting alongside them, and sometimes witnessed these scenes with my own eyes. Law enforcement officers beat, clubbed, and imprisoned people of all ages and nationalities: first and foremost, Palestinians and anti-Zionist Jews.

The tragedy is twofold. Not only are these people fighting to stop atrocious crimes, but they are doing so by exercising their sacrosanct right to criticize and dissent; a right that complements an even more fundamental freedom of expression and which should be one of the bulwarks of our so-called liberal democracies.

What is democracy if there is no room for debate?

Of the people from the think tanks I'd met in Berlin the previous year, none showed up this time. Of the eighteen NGO delegates, only three showed up.

Then, the night before the event at the "junge Welt" headquarters, there was a threat of arrest. The German Federal Police contacted the sponsoring organizations to warn me not to show up, otherwise I could be arrested for violating German anti-Semitic laws. After a nearly sleepless night, at six in the morning I called Max, my husband, and told him, "I don't know what I should do, Max... I know I'm doing the right thing, but I don't want to be arrested. I haven't seen the children in twenty days."

He answered me, seraphic: «You go ahead and do what you have to do.
We are here."

So I went.

But the UN had to intervene, reminding the German police that as a UN Rapporteur I enjoy diplomatic immunity, and that my arrest would be an unprecedented scandal. Only then did they calm down, but the event was held virtually under siege: in addition to the twenty vans outside the newspaper's headquarters, police officers in

Riot gear filled the room. I arrived smiling, pretending nothing had happened; when I took the stage, my heart was filled with indignation, but that didn't stop me from expressing myself clearly and precisely. At the end of the event, Michael Barenboim, violinist and professor at the Barenboim-Said Academy, played with Palestinian violinists. It was beautiful. And the next day, Melanie Schweizer, a German government official who had attended the event, and who had already been suspended for her criticism of Israeli policies, was fired.

This is the level of repression one experiences in Germany today.

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The crisis in Gaza is now a symptom of a global crisis, as my colleague Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, said a year ago.

I think more and more often that all this, while it should inspire fear, should also instill courage in us. The system that represses Palestinians—a well-tested alliance between Israel and all the other states whose elites guarantee it the impunity it has always enjoyed—is the same one to which we belong. It is the system that decides for us on issues that are crucial to all of our lives, without necessarily listening to us or representing us; the one that transforms work into precariousness and rights into privileges, that manages to alienate us from one another, making us all more fragile and insecure; that considers solidarity a subversive act and empathy a form of mental and social dysfunction. These are insidious mechanisms that, day after day, contribute to disintegrating bonds and compromising our ability to act together for a just cause, from the environment to Palestine, including precarious workers and gender issues. I've often reflected on the fact that for me, Palestine was the red pill from the ***Matrix,*** the one that opens your eyes to the hidden reality of things. My work, all the study I've done over the years on the Palestinian question, has helped me better see and understand the system we live in. And, in a counterintuitive way, to continue to love it.

Recently, I've truly understood the value of courage needed to challenge the mechanisms of the system. I've had countless opportunities to observe and ask questions, during months of incessant travel, during which I've met a multitude of faces and stories: officials, members of civil society, scholars and intellectuals, workers, unions, and, above all, countless students and ordinary people. Special people seeking useful and meaningful words, longing to find hope to exchange and share. This has happened to me in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, Egypt, Jordan, Canada, and, many times, in Italy. Even in Belgium, where the presence of European institutions—sometimes more tied to bureaucracy than to effective results—often makes the atmosphere particularly tense. A long journey that has allowed me to grasp the transversal impulse of many communities seeking justice, truth, dignity, and a better future, transcending differences.

In assembling the pages of the book you hold in your hands, surrounded physically and virtually by all these traveling companions, I have chosen to dedicate to ten people dear to me the story of the themes I consider fundamental to understanding the history, present, and future of Palestine. These ten people, with their teachings, their testimony, and sometimes even their presence, have accompanied my journey of discovery through a land that has suffered for far too long.

So it will be George, one of my closest friends from the years my husband Max and I lived in Jerusalem, who will introduce us to the city's streets from both sides, past the wonderful old houses, the bookstores where children's books are now confiscated by the Israeli military, and the clubs where, until a few years ago, you could go dancing alongside Israeli kids themselves, in this case without uniforms. It will be Ingrid, a European woman who chose Palestine and who has given so much to Palestine, who will explain to us the importance of a certain rigor in thought and of using the apartheid legal framework, as she made clear to me in 2017. It will be Eyal, who left Israel long ago and feels he has no right to return until he can travel with a Palestinian passport, that is, of a single, democratic state, who will illuminate the complexity of the physical and material conditions that generate a genocide. It will be Hind, who died at the age of six.

For the guilt of being Palestinian, to open our eyes to what it means to be children in a country where for generations, children have been denied a safe haven and respect for their roots. Gabor, marked early by the persecution of Jews, will enlighten us on the folly of what is happening to the Palestinian people and the myth of normality. And then Ghassan, the surgeon who came from London to enter the heart of the most unimaginable horror in Gaza in the first months of the genocidal assault; Malak, the young artist who made the reverse journey, leaving Gaza for London to recount her people's story through painting; Abu Hassan, who guided us to the places that reveal their struggle and oppression; Alon, a great scholar of genocide and a precious friend, who helped me better understand the conflicts that can linger in the heart of an Israeli Jew who "sees" the Palestinians and feels their cause as his own: because in the liberation of the Palestinian people from the oppression of apartheid lies the key to the liberation of Israelis themselves; to one of the people closest to me, in life as well as in the search for an awareness that we can be capable of translating into action.

Ten people, ten stories intertwined with the lives and faces of many others—including me, my family, the clerk in an Irish shop, or the children who came to eat mulberry trees in front of our house in Jerusalem—as they pose ten questions that today seem too difficult to answer. For example: what conditions do the Palestinian people live in? What are the consequences of the occupation? Where is "home" for a refugee? What does it mean to be anti-Semitic in the context of human rights struggles? How far can the cruelty of genocide go?

Today we cannot avoid these questions.

And, as a result of what's happening, even more questions arise within me. For example: why continue writing about Palestine in a country like Italy, where it's both necessary and difficult to make voices heard that expose the facts and explain the legal aspects in a clear manner? Despite my institutional role, and despite the fact that I've never done anything that might make me unpopular with the Italian media, I've been the target of endless insults and excluded, with a few rare exceptions, from the national media landscape. So the only answer I can give myself is:

this: since the need to talk about it does not go away, but rather becomes more and more pressing, I choose to seize every possible opportunity to do so, including this book.

Developing, in this terrible moment, the germ of an idea that had been buzzing around in my head for years—that of writing a book of "Polaroids from Jerusalem"—I also want to recount Palestine as I experienced it: not as an activist, but as someone who initially approached it with cultural curiosity and, later, with a legal perspective. When I arrived at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, in 2005, one of the few European academic institutions that addresses the issues of law, human rights, and decoloniality from a critical, non-Eurocentric perspective, I discovered two fundamental things.

The first, that Palestine could – and ***should*** – be discussed as a legal issue of protracted, institutional, and systemic illegality, and not simply as a political issue with competing claims.
There was much more that was left unsaid: and that unsaid began to feel uncomfortable for me, because it allowed even people who had never set foot in Palestine to express themselves, often superficially and applying double standards in evaluating the parties involved. The second discovery was my encounter with legal studies influenced by ***critical race theory:*** a way of understanding law from a critical and decolonial perspective, framing it in historical evolution, not necessarily written by the victors, but observed from the perspective of the peoples who, until recently, had to endure international law—as formulated primarily by Western countries.

In 2010, I went to live in Palestine with my husband Max, as an international civil servant, and remained there until the end of 2012. I then continued to work on the subject as an academic. And it is thanks to this path that I received the mandate of United Nations Special Rapporteur, which I try to honor every day by demonstrating that the key points of law, ultimately, are and must be understandable to everyone, because they concern each of us. The international law I deal with as Special Rapporteur consists simply of the set of rules that States adopt to regulate their relationships: rights, duties, and mutual obligations. Then we...

It is the rights of people, human rights, that represent our protection: our shields and, if necessary, our swords.

My desire is to be able to articulate and explain how blatant injustice is in the daily lives of Palestinians.

A desire that also runs through the pages of this book. A book born in the era of a genocide that exposed its brutality to the world, and written under immense pressure. I was convinced that, following all the absurd pressure from influential actors against me, the Human Rights Council would not reappoint me. Yet the Council continues to place its trust in me, and the book's release will coincide with the start of my second term as Special Rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian territory, which will allow me to continue addressing these issues, now so closely, inextricably intertwined with my own life, especially now that the present, future, and even the past of this people are more threatened than ever.

In Palestine—after fifty-seven years of military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and seventy-seven years since the beginning of the ethnic cleansing that reached its historic peak with the Nakba, the forced exodus of Palestinians that began in 1948 with the founding of Israel—the genocide Israel is committing is being perpetrated with the knowledge and approval of the established power, which until now has kept everyone subjugated with the threat of retaliation.

The United States, under President Trump, has repeatedly implied that anyone who dares touch Israel will have to "deal with them." This threatening language is unbecoming of politics as we've known it, but it's entirely consistent with Trump's own statement, when he stated that "everyone I've spoken to likes the idea that the United States owns ***that piece of land,"*** referring to the Gaza Strip. This statement captures the full force of unbridled power, which can achieve anything through force because, like a twenty-first-century Caligula, it considers itself above the law. Indeed, it doesn't even see the law.

Well, the time has come to ***deal with it,*** with the United States and beyond: for us "Westerners," especially for us Europeans, this is the opportunity to unravel the knots of the colonial past and begin to pay off our debt. It's time to stand against the devastation of Gaza and what

What remains of Palestine, and to fight against an international system founded on the use of force in the name of a so-called "peace," always invoked to benefit a few and always using words to mystify the reality of what is being done, exactly as Orwell prophesied almost a century ago. Today, the concept of "doublethink" advocated by the Ministry of Truth he envisioned in ***1984*** —a fundamental tool for the mind control exercised by the totalitarian regime described in the novel—no longer seems so fanciful, and indeed invites us to open our eyes to see what we are truly facing.

Even for the most sophisticated experts in doublespeak, it is no longer possible to deny the truth about Palestine. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice recognized beyond any reasonable doubt that Israel's occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem since 1967 is illegal and must be completely and unconditionally abandoned.

The occupation is illegal because, by its very presence, it prevents Palestinians from enjoying their right to self-determination: the right of a people to exist and determine themselves, that is, to choose for themselves, without foreign control over the territory and the lives of the Palestinians who inhabit it. Yet, this simple right to exist as a people and live in freedom is still contested by some or dangerously confused with the two-state solution. But I don't think you need to be a lawyer to understand that every other right loses its meaning and becomes an exercise in mere intellectual rhetoric without the right to self-determination.

What is unfolding in Gaza, and in other areas of Palestine under Israel's illegal control, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem, is settler colonialism through a process of total, methodical, and planned destruction. In Gaza, this process is already a tangible reality, and the destruction affects physical and biological life in all its forms, annihilating everything that exists, including, of course, the human beings who live (or rather, used to live) there. In the West Bank—where Jewish-only settlements are a pervasive and ever-expanding presence, surrounding the places where Palestinians live increasingly segregated—while one is safe from carpet bombing like that which has devastated much of Gaza, one is not safe from the destruction by explosives and mechanical demolitions, which, along with settler violence, affects homes, schools, and entire buildings.

neighborhoods, right down to the olive groves and beehives. There is no peace in Palestine, if you're Palestinian. Security in that land—and not only there, unfortunately—is a one-way street; if you're Palestinian, it's invoked only to stifle your freedom. To punish you.

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While we were in Berlin, Eyal Weizman told me that friends from Gaza had confided in him that, faced with a bread shortage, families in the Deir al-Balah area had organized themselves to protect the few resources available. "We need to put security guards on the bread and flour," they said. Israeli soldiers called the bakery owner and demanded he stop the practice: "If you don't remove these security guards, we will bomb you, the bakery, and the security guards as well." What's the point of all this?

Today, it's not uncommon to come across arguments like: "Well, Israel doesn't want to destroy the Palestinians. Israel just wants to eradicate Hamas," or: "It wants to free the hostages. If only Hamas would free them..."

To these people, I would like to point out that, first of all, if you bomb a bakery, if you kill tens of thousands of children, maim and orphan ten times as many, it's clear that your actions are not in line with the stated motives of freeing the hostages or eliminating Hamas, however dangerously vague such a purpose may be. Ultimately, just think about it for a moment: who is Hamas? Who is fighting, or who voted for it in 2006? Who worked in the hospitals under its authority? Who is resisting the occupation? Who is opposing the genocide?

These kinds of motivations may indeed exist in the minds of Israeli leaders or the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, often very young, who carry out their orders. But it's crucial to understand that they have nothing to do with what, in identifying the crime of genocide, is called "intent," or in legal jargon, ***mens rea.*** The intent to destroy should be understood as a ***determination*** to destroy: when a destructive idea is conceived and formulated against a group ***as such,*** regardless of the motives—even if it's supposedly self-defense.

–, there is an air of genocide.

Genocide is a very serious crime, which should simply not be possible in the current era, given the guarantees and preventive mechanisms that exist in various legal systems, both national and international.
Instead, this is exactly what Israel committed, plotted by its leaders and executed by its soldiers, with the complicity of too many Western politicians and the hateful connivance of the mainstream media, which denied, watered down, and distorted reality so as not to disturb the dictates of the Israeli embassies and the extremely powerful networks supporting Israel, "the West's final frontier."

The destruction of a group as such, when it is not accidental, a mere "accident of war," however brutal it may be, but intentional, constitutes genocide. This intentional destruction was inflicted on the body, the collective life, and the spirit of the Palestinians; on their skin. Gaza was its theater, certainly the most ferocious. The most horrific.

I fear a society in which killing, mutilation, torture, rape, hunger, and famine make headlines depending on who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. And I have often questioned this during my years as Special Rapporteur, where I often found myself at the center of discussions about the meaning of "impartiality."

When human lives are at stake, impartiality becomes a duty that forces us to side with law, justice, and the victims.
Being impartial means having the courage to stand up for what is right, to give voice to those who have been silenced or simply ignored, and to fight against the abuses that plague our world.
Impartiality does not consist in pretending not to have an opinion in the face of atrocities, or in assuming one must maintain an equidistant position between two opposing sides, even when their positions are structurally and historically unequal and when one side occupies, plunders, and oppresses while the other is occupied, plundered, and oppressed, triggering disastrous mechanisms of violence.

How is it possible that the truth has become a lie and the lie has become the truth?

To this rampant evil, which would like us all to be either entangled or simply vanquished, we must respond with awareness and action. Knowledge is a fundamental weapon, because understanding is the best defense.

against manipulation, exploitation and deception; and action should flow naturally.

But how can there be a chance of salvation for all of us, for Palestinians and Israelis alike? I see it. Even if it's only in my mind's eye, I see it, and I also see the shape of the path that leads us there. Moreover, I know that this vision is truly shared: all the people who, since the beginning of the genocide, have recognized in me a hope, a light, a point of reference, have given me a strength I never imagined. Despite the complaints, the death threats, the fear that something might backfire on what is most dear to you in the world, fighting for a just cause is a command that some of us are ill-equipped to disobey.

I deeply believe in the possibility of coming together as a human family, rediscovering the true and profound meaning of solidarity; the Latin term ***solidum*** implies the very idea of a "whole": something whole, undivided, complete, often in opposition to what is fragmented or broken. And so, as a single body, we should be able to unite, meet, and resist. Solidarity, in these terms, becomes a "political declination of love," as American Rabbi Alissa Wise wisely observed.

Alone, we are as fragile as a butterfly's wings, but united—solid and supportive—we can make a storm. This isn't a fanciful hyperbole; it's a principle of physics called ***the butterfly effect.*** Our every small gesture is a flutter of wings that triggers a chain of consequences: like that of Mary, one of the many shop assistants in one of the many shops in an Irish city. How can we believe that her decision, whether or not to hand over a customer's grapefruit at the checkout, can have a long-term impact on the overthrow of apartheid in a country as far away as South Africa? Yet we must believe it, because history teaches us that this can happen.

It is in the interconnectedness of struggles for emancipation and freedom—individual or collective—that we must rediscover our ***solidum.*** Together, we can face any challenge.

So let's flap our wings, let's make a storm, or rather, as they say in my language go on, let's make ***a racket!***

Happy reading,
Francesca Albanese

Hind

What is childhood in Palestine?

> To reach a point of no longer being afraid. This is man's ultimate goal.
>
> ITALO CALVINO, ***The Path to the Spiders' Nests***

Late January 2024. Hind Rajab is six years old. She's curled up in the back seat of her aunt and uncle's car, huddling with her four cousins.
As soon as yet another evacuation order arrived in western Gaza, her mother and siblings fled on foot, but since it was raining and cold, her uncles took her with them in their car.

It's early afternoon, the sound of bombs penetrates right into the cabin, and the cars seem stuck in a traffic jam. Something's wrong.
The uncles hear it, they're nervous, talking excitedly. Not far from a gas station near Tel al-Hawa, the car comes under a hail of Israeli artillery fire. Then comes a surreal chill.

Hind looks around: no one is speaking and they are all slumped over.
With hands that must be shaking, she takes the phone from her fifteen-year-old cousin Layan, who was shot while talking to Red Crescent workers. Hind explains that "the others are dead or maybe sleeping" and begs for help. "The tank is next to me. It's moving. Will you come get me? I'm so scared."

On the other end of the line, the operator – terrified, knowing the risk Hind is running – responds affectionately: ***"Habibti,"*** "darling," and stays on the phone with her so as not to leave her alone.

After three hours of communication – that's how long it took her colleagues from the Red Crescent to coordinate with the Israeli authorities to locate the car and obtain permission to rescue the little girl – the operator reassures Hind that two rescuers are on their way

to her aid. The recording of that heartbreaking conversation, with the little girl's life hanging by a thread, has been consecrated to history, and hopefully, one day, to the work of the judges who will punish those responsible for the massacre in which Hind was killed by the Israeli army.

After twelve days, Hind's lifeless body will be found in that car that had been repeatedly shot at, pierced by over three hundred bullets, not far from the ambulance containing the bodies of her Red Crescent rescuers, who did not have time to reach her. And the investigations of the British Forensic Architecture team led by Professor Eyal Weizman, reconstructing the distances and dynamics of the shots, have demonstrated that "it is implausible" that the Israeli soldiers who fired from the tank did not have a clear view of the presence of civilians in the vehicle, including two young girls.

Hind's story has become a symbol of the brutality of the Israeli assault on the people of Gaza in the aftermath of October 7, 2023.
But the little girl was killed more than three months after October 7, when Israel had already killed more than twenty-six thousand people, including at least ten thousand children. How could all this be tolerated? And how is it possible that even today—at the end of March 2025, as I am completing the revision of this book—when the confirmed number of child deaths has reached over seventeen thousand, including a thousand under one year of age, impunity continues to reign and the death machine unleashed by Israel continues unabated?

The answer lies in decades of discursive manipulation that has distorted the perception of the balance of power between Israelis and Palestinians.

Over the past thirty years, this narrative has led many to believe that Palestinians are responsible for their own plight, that they represent an existential threat to Israel. Even children? Yes, even them, and perhaps especially them, because within the logic of the Israeli assault that began after October 7th, every Palestinian life is seen as a potential future threat to Israel's survival.

How many Palestinian children have died like this? With the perpetrators' impunity, amid the excruciating pain of entire families and communities? Tens of thousands.
Hind's story, as atrocious as it is, is not an unusual one in Palestine.
Mohammed Tamimi was two years old when, a few months before the 7th

October 2023, Israeli occupation forces – formally known as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) – shot him in the head while he was in a car with his father in the occupied West Bank.

No one was held accountable, as always.

This is childhood, in Palestine.

In Jerusalem, near the garden of the house where Max and I lived, there was a small hill with a huge, incredible, generous mulberry tree that bore fruit for months on end. Beneath that tree, a purple carpet of fallen mulberry trees always formed, and the children often came to collect them.

Right below the house was a low stone wall with one of those metal mesh gates attached, which must have been put there temporarily years before, but had remained there. The children, passing by to get mulberry trees, had dug their way through.

One day I saw them and said, "Hey guys, whenever you want mulberry trees, if you knock I'll open the door for you, so you don't have to go down there." Most of them didn't understand me, because almost none of them spoke English; except for one little boy with big dark eyes whom I'd already noticed in the area with his friends and his twin sister.

"Hi," I repeated, addressing him directly. "I know you're from this neighborhood; I've seen you play many times. When you want some mulberry, don't worry, just give us a call, so you don't risk getting hurt on the net."

His response, respectful but firm, left me speechless.

"No, thanks," he told me. "You don't need to leave the gate open for us. We'll keep taking them like this, climbing, like we always have."

At eleven years old, little Mohammed already seemed very assertive to me. His family was one of the first in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood to suffer the expropriation of the house where Rifqa, Mohammed's grandmother, and his sister Muna, had taken refuge in 1948 after being expelled from Haifa (now in Israel), by Israeli settlers—armed civilians who populate the West Bank settlements, supported by the army. After a long legal battle, in 2009 the main building of their property was occupied by Israeli settlers, while the El-Kurd family had to

to build an extension in the garden to the house where all the family members were forced to live.

Mohammed's reaction surprised me, because it's not a given that an eleven-year-old—or seven, twelve, fourteen—has that kind of awareness of rights, space, and identity. But for Palestinians who grew up under occupation, as well as for the millions born in refugee camps around Palestine, it's true. Generations of people have grown up watching their land, day after day, being uprooted from under their feet like a carpet, fueling an endless struggle for housing, for dignity, for everything that should be taken for granted at that age. Palestinians have their childhoods ripped away from them; they grow up in the bodies of children, already burdened with worries, anxieties, fears, and responsibilities that shouldn't be their age.

For this reason, as UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory, in 2023 I decided to dedicate my third report to childhood, using an English word that vividly describes the Palestinian reality: ***unchilding .*** The choice of this theme stemmed from the hope that showing what a child's life in Palestine really entails, combined with statistics and the law, could help the public better understand the gravity of the situation.

When I did my research, everything was different than it is today: the report was presented two weeks after October 7, 2023, but it was concluded two weeks earlier. The situation was already dire.

By that autumn, the statistics of Palestinian children killed in fifteen years (from 2008 to September 2023) were stark: more than 1,400. Each of them, a small universe forever erased. From October 7, 2023, to March 2025, these already horrifying numbers had increased tenfold: in seventeen months, over seventeen thousand children had been killed, more than a thousand newborns whose lives were cut short before they could even learn to crawl, speak, or play.

In Gaza, in August 2024, Mohammed Abu al-Qumsan was applying for birth certificates for his three-day-old twins when he received a call: Your apartment has been bombed, your children and your

My wife and I are in the hospital. There was nothing that could be done for them. They died before they even opened their eyes to life.

This is childhood, in Palestine.

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In 2023, having failed to receive the necessary authorization from the Israeli government to conduct my research in the occupied region for my report to the UN General Assembly that fall, I decided to take an alternative approach. With the support of Palestinian civil society and other collaborators, we created focus groups that allowed me to interview children online.

At the time, I was on vacation with my family in Sicily, staying with my grandparents (my in-laws). Every afternoon, after lunch with my children and a quick dip in the sea, I would prepare to go up to the terrace of the resort. There, I would plug my computer into one of the few available power outlets and begin the meetings that lasted several hours each day.

The groups of children and adolescents interviewed quickly proved to be well-structured and disciplined. Divided by age group and geographic location, both the children and their parents and caregivers were enthusiastic about the opportunity to share their experiences and testimonies with me.
Gathered around a table, or sitting on chairs sometimes larger than themselves (like the children in Jenin), they were all intently watching the screen. Someone translated, although, especially in Gaza, most of the children spoke good English, so I could interact directly, without the need for intermediation.

Those encounters presented me with a true miracle of life, vitality, and sweetness, a setting in which energy and hope seemed to endure despite adversity. Amid all the hardships of permanent occupation, the incessant wars in Gaza, where the siege effectively imprisoned everyone in a ghetto, and the devastating proximity of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, with frequent arrests, constant soldier incursions, and settler attacks, the children I met that summer demonstrated an extraordinary ability to preserve values.

fundamental, first and foremost a love of school. With the elegant shirts worn for the occasion and the neatly combed hair for the boys, the colorful dresses and the long hair tied in a scarf or left loose on the shoulders for the girls, those voices spoke to me of a great thirst for knowledge and a burning desire for the future.

This is childhood too, in Palestine.

One aspect that struck me, especially at the beginning, and taught me something about myself and the prejudices we sometimes unwittingly carry with us, was the fact that the children were extremely knowledgeable when it came to less personal and more general topics. Whether we were talking about issues related to water, education, or freedom of movement, they told me about the violations they suffered in such precise and assertive language that it almost seemed forced, constructed. "They seem like little lawyers," I thought. But I soon realized that there was nothing artificial about their ability to argue and engage. "They're not my children, who go to school, play, and lead a protected, cocooned life," I told myself, realizing that those children and young people have always lived through painful and frightening experiences firsthand. So it's understandable that for them, speaking about human rights becomes a cry for life, a passionate plea for answers.

How is this happening to us, if on paper so many rights should be guaranteed for all? It's a question that resonates powerfully among Palestinian children, a call for a justice that often seems unattainable. While my eight-year-old son has to worry about memorizing his multiplication tables, Palestinian children are appropriating the language of law as a manifesto to assert their existence, their humanity. And so, paradoxically, it was precisely to defend their right to exist, to be children, that at times they became veritable advocates, shouldering an incredible burden.

An ancient burden, one that has lingered in their society for generations: this is why, I believe, their innocence also manifested such a deeply rooted awareness of injustice. It takes superhuman courage for a child to confront the awareness of oppression: that state of permanent war, of being separated from everyone.

other Palestinians around the world, unable to travel, or even dream of the simplest things in life.

For me, on those days, it was paradoxical to move a few meters from the world around me—a world where the most important questions were: "Have the children eaten?", "What have they done?", "Who's fighting with whom?", "Who wolfed down two ice creams behind my back?"—to spend every afternoon with the children of Gaza City, Khan Yunis, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus, Ramallah, Masafer Yatta and let myself be absorbed in another, completely different dimension.

On a few rare occasions, my son Giordano, who was six years old at the time, with the spontaneity typical of his age, came over to see who I was talking to, regardless of the fact that I was wearing a bathing suit.
I remember one day a child asked me, “Why isn’t he dressed?”

"Because we're at the seaside," I replied. But they were the children of the West Bank, who have never seen the sea.

We had many more meetings with children living in the West Bank than with those in the Gaza Strip, because the logistics were more challenging: it was difficult, for example, to organize buses to pick them up or have their parents drop them off, often due to the hundreds of checkpoints, both fixed and mobile, set up by the Israeli army to "monitor" Palestinian movements. We had to schedule many different meetings, each with only four or five children, who often changed from time to time. They were sitting calmly waiting for me, all excited, and already prepared on what they wanted to tell me. I let them talk. I had already collected data on wars, attacks, the destruction of homes, hospitals, and schools, evictions, killings, and arrests, and so I was especially keen to get them to talk about their lives: their homes, their games, their travels, their families, so that the report I was drafting would be "theirs," and, as much as possible, have their voices.

The focus groups never lasted less than a couple of hours; toward the end, after we'd gotten to know each other a bit, I felt ready to ask the question: "Is there anything you're afraid of?" Inevitably, everyone talked about death. These children's greatest fear was dying or losing their parents. Second on the list was arrest; third was "they'll tear my house down." These are the most common fears of Palestinian children; this is how they grow up. That alone strikes me as incredibly brutal.

"We have to fight for the right to breathe, to be here, to stay in our land without having to suffer every day," said Rawan, eleven. And Aladdin, fourteen: "We always have to run away from some danger, if it's not the soldiers, it's the settlers."

In the descriptions of the children and young people I spoke to, I heard countless stories where violence and fear were expressed in myriad ways: the violence of checkpoints, of losing their father's job, of being slapped, beaten, stripped naked in public, of the "I'll take your land, I'll force your parents to humiliate me," the suffering of not having parents at home, because, if they are arrested or killed, you then have to grow up with some relative, near or far, who certainly loves you, but is neither mom nor dad.

Their daily life, even before October 7, 2023, was like this. "They were bombing us from all sides, they were everywhere, we were so afraid that our parents would die," Yasmine, sixteen, told me, having already lived through five wars in Gaza by that point. And this is the story of Samer, eleven: "My dad was killed near a settlement by soldiers. They said he was violent... Not only did I lose the most important person in my life, but they also came to take our home. First I became an orphan, then they left me without a home." "Last year, soldiers attacked my school three or four times. They threw tear gas and fired live ammunition. Many of the teachers and my classmates couldn't breathe," Fares, twelve, told me.

This is childhood in Palestine.

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And unfortunately, this is not the only thing that is robbing Palestinian children of their childhood. The violence they witness and are victims of is not only brutally sudden, but also—just as brutally— ***systemic:*** something that insinuates itself into the daily lives of every person and defines their contours. When I wrote the report on childhood, we also counted children injured and maimed for life, the children of parents who died, were injured, or maimed, and all the people, adults and minors, who have suffered trauma. These numbers are breathtaking, but at the same time they say nothing, so much so that Palestinians

They have been rebelling for years against the risk of trivializing statistics: a young writers' organization founded in Gaza by the academic and poet Refaat Alareer is called precisely We Are Not Numbers. This organization was born in opposition to the destruction of Palestinian culture, image, and hopes in Gaza, caused by the permanent occupation. By the permanent conflict.

It is the entire life of the Palestinians – especially the youngest – that seems be there, ready for destruction. Think of their existential spaces.

For any child, home should be the center of childhood, a safe haven where they can grow, explore, and dream. Yet, in Palestine, the certainty of protection isn't even found within the walls of their home. The expropriation and destruction of homes have become a tool of the Israeli occupation, so those who grow up in this reality are forced to live with a forced "non-belonging" imposed from outside. Every brick removed from ownership or razed to the ground isn't just a demolished home, but a piece of life, of history and an erased past, as well as a mortgaged future, irreparably scarring the souls of the youngest. This violence creates a profound wound, a loss that transcends the material, breaking bonds and communities and casting the shadow of a precarious existence over the innocence of youth.

Indeed, Israeli settler colonialism, designed to progressively (and illegally) annex what remains of Palestinian territory, does more than just this; it creates a coercive environment that stifles the possibilities for growth and development. Children and their families are pushed into poverty, denied basic resources like water and electricity. Spatial segregation and the restrictions imposed by the occupation prevent them from accessing adequate education and healthcare, both in Gaza (even before the current attack) and in the West Bank.

The occupation, therefore, affects every aspect of Palestinian life.
In the occupied territory, punitive demolitions and forced evictions leave many families homeless, condemning children to a childhood marked by anxiety and uncertainty. The blockade of Gaza—a veritable open-air prison for sixteen years, before its total destruction—and the constant military attacks have destroyed essential infrastructure for years, forcing millions of people to depend on aid.

Humanitarians. Generations of children have not only witnessed the loss of their homes and lands, their families and friends, but have also internalized the trauma of seeing their people constantly humiliated and deprived of sustenance and dignity.

Today's Palestinian children, who represent nearly half the population, have lived their entire lives under occupation, like their parents before them. A system that for generations has deprived them of fundamental rights such as self-determination, life, security, dignity, and development, turning every day of their childhood into a struggle not to succumb. These children grow into adults surrounded by violence, seeing their homes demolished, their schools destroyed, and their lands confiscated. The images of children moving through the rubble of their homes, picking up toys and pieces of books that escaped the bulldozers, or consoling their beleaguered parents, are etched in my memory.

That summer two years ago, which now seems so distant, in addition to focus groups with children, I also decided to interview adults who were minors during the first and second intifadas and who have since become parents or even grandparents. One thing that clearly emerged was how increasingly aggressive the occupation had become.

Ahmed told me: "At least when we were kids, during the first intifada, we could go running in the hills. Now there's the wall. There are too many checkpoints. Now there's not even any space left."

Over the years, Israeli settlements have continued their relentless expansion: from the Oslo Accords in the 1990s to the construction of the wall in the early 2000s, to the ongoing violence in the West Bank, the space in which these people can live has progressively shrunk and fragmented.

Children have been deprived even of the space to imagine. They are encapsulated. Thus I became aware of another crucial element of the occupation: the aesthetics of carcerality. Growing up under Israeli occupation is like growing up in an open-air prison, made up of checkpoints, watchtowers, settlements that look down on what remains of the territory, armed guards who restore their version of order at every perceived threat. The violence suffered in this space is not only physical, but also psychological. I think of the children I have known, and I imagine that many of them will eventually leave their land, where

there seems to be no horizon left, and dreams are suffocated by the brutality of the occupation.

In this open-air prison where adults and children are forced to live, the arrest figures for Palestinian minors are also shocking: from 2000 to 2023, more than thirteen thousand minors were detained, arrested, and imprisoned; and since October 2023, the number has already risen to more than three hundred.

Arrests are carried out on any pretext; like the case recounted by Abir, fourteen: "A [Palestinian] boy was walking down the street. The soldiers stopped him, searched him, beat him, and finally arrested him because he refused to take off his pants during the search." Having myself witnessed a myriad of similar abuses and harassment against Palestinians by the Israeli army and police, none of this horror was new to me. But it was painful to hear it recounted by such young people.

During the period in which I conducted focus groups with Palestinian children, violence at checkpoints and armed raids by the Israeli army on Palestinian villages, day and night, were the order of the day.

Israeli soldiers themselves, for example those from Breaking the Silence—an organization of former Israeli soldiers who publicly denounce army abuses in the occupied territory to raise awareness of the impact of the occupation not only on Palestinians but also on the military—candidly acknowledged that they had orders to invade villages, sometimes –, every night for weeks, if not months: they had to exhaust the population to convince them to leave, in the name of "Israeli security."

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To the structural, daily violence that affects homes and threatens the safety and dignity of children and their families every day, we must then add the eruptive violence of wars, pogroms by armed settlers (increasingly numerous in the West Bank), and military attacks.

Every year, hundreds of children and young people are arbitrarily arrested, maimed, or killed, suffering profound physical and psychological trauma that often goes untreated or untreated.

Upon closer inspection, for all Palestinians, including the youngest segments of the population, protection is a pipe dream: it doesn't exist, either from institutions or elsewhere. Children grow up with this constant, terrible exposure to violence, and the entire society is affected by it. There's a profound intergenerational trauma, which I saw even when I met the young people who had been detained. They were traumatized. Even those who later undergo rehabilitation and do relatively better bear the deep scars forever. Some return to school, but it's extremely difficult, because if you're released from prison too early, it means you've spoken out, and as a result, you're ostracized by your community. If, on the other hand, you resisted for six months, a year, two years, then you're a hero. But if you got out, your parents probably had to pay for your release.

It's not normal to grow up in a system like this. When people ask, "Where does violence come from?", understanding is as simple as broadening your perspective and putting aside your prejudices.

The stories I heard during the online meetings deeply affected me. 2023 had been a very violent year: there had been at least seventeen attacks on Palestinian villages by settlers, resulting in cars and homes being burned, and Palestinians being killed. I remember a twelve-year-old boy who had lost his sister during a military attack on Jenin in the summer of 2023. The city had been under siege for days, and his sister had been killed in her backyard by the Israeli army. Everyone told me about this girl, of the void she had left in the refugee camp where she had grown up, in the Freedom Theatre of Jenin of which she was a member. That theatre, which has taken the name of freedom, is an institution that allows children in an area of permanent high tension to explore their creativity, to express what they carry within them.

“How much pain can such small bodies contain?” I thought as that child, lucid and composed, told me the story of his sister killed almost before his eyes.

Laila Mohammed Ayman Khatib was two years old and was having dinner at home with her family when an Israeli soldier shot her in the back of the head. It happened in January 2025. How many newspapers covered it? Why is the life (and death) of Palestinians so lost in our societies?

Furthermore, this is how Israel plants the seeds of hatred among the Palestinians, and it seems incredible to me that this is not understood.

Yet another thing that deeply struck me on those summer afternoons in 2023 was the strong sense of discipline, resilience, and mutual respect I perceived in the focus groups in Gaza. There were children's councils, non-governmental organizations that had created meeting spaces where young people could discuss the situations they were experiencing, the hardships they were enduring. I remember an exchange between two little girls who were delicately discussing things. One said: "It's true that the closure and the siege are terrible for everyone, but at least you, with leukemia, were able to go to the West Bank and see the mountains! I've never seen the mountains."

Illness is another theme that often emerges in my conversations with children. In Gaza, for example, even before the genocide, the land was polluted, overpopulated, littered with the remains of unexploded ordnance, and the water undrinkable. Contamination was everywhere, and the number of people suffering from leukemia and cancer, even among minors, was extremely high. Several reports by the UN and other humanitarian organizations have documented tragic situations, such as that of Gazan children, some as young as four or five, forced to travel alone to receive medical care in the West Bank. Their parents were not allowed to accompany them. These restrictions are part of the broader security measures adopted by Israel against the population of Gaza since 2007, which have had a devastating impact on all forms of Palestinian mobility. Gaza lacked adequate healthcare facilities, forcing many families to seek medical care outside the territory. This practice not only jeopardized the children's safety, but also caused enormous emotional distress to both the young patients and their families, forced to separate at moments of great vulnerability. But Palestinians are usually extremely supportive: there was always someone there to welcome them—a friend, a relative, a member of a humanitarian organization.

This is childhood, in Palestine.

Or rather, ***it was,*** when the children I spoke to were all still alive and Gaza was teeming with life. Now there's nothing left that hasn't been torn apart by the war: from homes to families, to individual lives. The Gaza those kids told me about in 2023 no longer exists, and a

Much of the West Bank I knew is being destroyed as I write these pages. Although those who survived the massacre are eager to rebuild, what remains is rubble, and the dust hasn't yet settled on the rubble of Gaza. After more than five hundred days of almost uninterrupted bombing, the bombs continue to rain down.

In the midst of the Palestinian genocide that began in October 2023, during a conference we held together in London, I heard Dr. Ghassan Abu Sitta say: "Children arrive dead, torn to pieces, seriously injured. I asked about their medical history, and no one knew anything. They weren't the children of their rescuers. Their parents had been killed."

This is childhood too, in Palestine.

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Growing up in Palestine means being a child in a climate of constant fear and insecurity, surrounded by the violence of settlers and soldiers. A situation that forces us to ask devastating questions. ***Why is this so? Are we less human than others?***

So it wasn't surprising that the children in my focus groups acted like adults and forcefully asserted their rights, even when they spoke to me. I told them: "Look, I'm here to listen to you, this is my job, and I truly want my relationship to be yours and for everything I say to speak with your voice. I don't know if that will change anything..." In the end, it got even worse. Much worse than we could have ever feared or imagined. "...But that's my promise."

I also remember that summer as the first time my children questioned me: "Why do you spend so much time with the kids on the computer and not with us?" I realized how strange it was for them, and I tried to answer, almost certain I wouldn't be understood, but at least for future reference: "Because, if I were the mother of a child living in a situation like that of those children on the computer, I would really want someone else to be able to help me. And if I were her, I would think that my children, the ones who live in Palestine, also have the right to the same things as this other mother's children: those who are now at the seaside, go to school, and those who are now at home."

I walk around half naked all day and, at most, they might be afraid of getting a sea urchin spine in their foot or arguing with a friend about who got to the buoy first."

It was as if on both sides of that computer screen—where on one side were those sharp, well-prepared children and on the other those who were enjoying their carefree holidays—I could hear the voices inside and the voices outside: only that some days it became difficult to distinguish them.

A little over a year later, I was at home in Tunis. It was afternoon, and outside the window, a few meters away, was my son Giordano, skipping rope and laughing. Meanwhile, on my laptop, images scrolled by of a mother from Gaza, running, screaming in despair, toward her home, where her son was burning alive.

This is childhood, in Palestine.

Child protection should be at the heart of any debate on the so-called "Palestinian question," in an effort to ensure every child's right to grow up protected, in a framework of safety, dignity, and freedom.

Yet, in that situation, it's not just Palestinian children who grow up in an utterly unjust system, which continually exposes them to violence, but Israeli children as well. Ultimately, they too are victims, because—as Israeli philologist Nurit Peled-Elhanan argues—being raised from an early age to fear and suspect others, to normalize violence, to perpetuate a worldview based on racial domination and oppression, driven by the ideology of their political leaders and often even their own parents, was not a choice.

But children grow up, and today's children are tomorrow's adults. If there's one thing generations of Palestinians teach us, it's that their people don't bow to occupation and resist, as best they can and as best they can. They did so against the British, who were selling off their land, in 1936-1939.
They did so in the late 1980s, at the outbreak of the first uprising against the occupation (first intifada), when the killing of four Palestinians in an accident with an Israeli military truck in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip triggered demonstrations across the

occupied territory. They did so during the second intifada that broke out in 2000, which, unlike the first, was marked by lethal violence, including by Palestinians. Resistance has continued, generally peacefully, but not always. And unfortunately, the more violent and hateful the oppression, the more violent the force aiming to remove it risks being.

Palestinians have always wanted to lead their own emancipation from occupation and apartheid. This collective determination has taken on an increasingly concrete and decisive form over time: for example, during the great protest movement of 2021, following yet another wave of harassment and abuse that had massively targeted Palestinian residents of Jerusalem. Leading this protest were many young people from Sheikh Jarrah—the neighborhood where I had also lived—and among them two twin brothers, Mohammed and Muna. When, years later, I had the opportunity to read about them, those faces seemed familiar, but at the time I couldn't connect them to anything specific; only later, seeing childhood photos of Mohammed El-Kurd, did I realize I knew him: he was the boy who came to play and pick mulberry trees in front of our house, and who even as a child, with his perfect English, could hold his own against a thirty-year-old foreigner.

Today, Mohammed El-Kurd is a journalist, a writer, and one of the strongest Palestinian voices defending his people. This is one of his lines: "I wasn't a victim / until the world told me."

In Palestine, childhood is a story of victims, of fear, of minors stripped of their right to grow up safe and protected, even though many parents do everything they can to give their children a somewhat peaceful life and a sense of normalcy, a bit like in the movie ***Life Is Beautiful,*** even within a reality that isn't beautiful. A reality where many of the children and young people I've met during my personal and professional experience in Palestine are now dead. A reality where a person's life can end at the age of six in a car riddled with hundreds of bullets, as happened to Hind.

Today, an organization that is committed to taking legal action against those responsible, complicit, and instigators of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Palestine, the Hind Rajab Foundation, is named after her.

This is very important, yet it does not erase death, suffering, and it does not erase fear.

Just as Ouadia, fourteen years old, told me: «Being afraid
Death doesn't stop you from dying: it stops you from living."
This is childhood, in Palestine.

Abu Hassan

What are the consequences of the occupation?

Our homes to others, widowed women.

Stones scattered at the entrance to the road.

CCCP, ***Palestine***

In Jerusalem, he's an institution, and he was the first Palestinian my husband, Max, and I met upon our arrival in the holy city, during my second interview with the legal department of UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East), for a new job that would change my life forever. After moving there, we continued to see him regularly. He was a cornerstone of so many experiences and decisions; yet I don't remember his real name. Everyone always called him Abu Hassan.

In the Arab world of the Levant (Middle East), prefixing a person's name with ***Abu*** or ***Umm*** is a way to acknowledge the transition from adolescence to adulthood, generally marked by the arrival of children (and the acquisition of the name of the first son or daughter), because ***Abu*** means "father of" and ***Umm*** "mother of." For example, our Arab friends jokingly call Max ***Abu Leila,*** and me ***Umm Leila.***

It was 2010, our first time in Jerusalem, and Max and I, both curious travelers, seized the opportunity to visit the city. We certainly knew a few things, but we had no idea what awaited us. So much so that the first thing we did was the classic tour of Old Jerusalem accompanied by Israeli guides, who took us to see the Western Wall, Underground Jerusalem, Silwan...

I remember that right there, in Silwan, we visited a part of the underground city and at a certain point one of the guides said to us: "See? These stones still bear the signs of the Exodus!" We were quite skeptical; before leaving, Max had read Shlomo Sand's ***The Invention of the Jewish People ,*** and that day at lunch we spent the whole time pondering the possibility that the Israelis were using this kind of archaeological narrative as part of "their colonial work," in an attempt to demonstrate that they had already been there two thousand years ago (what was meant by "colonial work" at the time was a rather nebulous concept). The presence of Jews in the biblical land of Israel, that is, two thousand years ago, is one of the key arguments used to defend Israel's right as a state of Jews alone, who in 1948 returned to the land from which they had been expelled some nineteen centuries earlier. Somehow, and for many, this justifies the endless occupation and all the other atrocities that have been committed every day, for decades, against the Palestinian people, based on the alleged idea: "We just came back and now you all go away, usurpers."

We were having lunch at the Jerusalem Hotel (another institution, located across from the Old City), where we started chatting with a person who worked there. We told him how surprised we were by the tour we'd just taken and how it seemed like a kind of archaeological propaganda. He responded by giving us a flyer and explaining that tours with Israeli guides weren't the only ones available in Jerusalem: he recommended we seek out Abu Hassan and follow him on one of his ***alternative tours.***

Abu Hassan was right around the corner. When he wasn't guiding, he spent most of his time at the Mihbash, a café located on the first floor of a historic building just steps from the hotel. As soon as we entered, we were greeted by a whiff of fried food and smoke. The place was truly kitsch, yet we immediately felt at home: soon, in fact, it would become our go-to place in Jerusalem. We asked for Abu Hassan, introduced ourselves, and asked if he had room for a tour in the coming days: we left with him the very next day.

To begin, he took us to places in Jerusalem where families were divided by the wall and children had to go through pipes.

We had to use the sewer system to get to school, due to the obstacles placed by the Israelis. He told us the ins and outs of archaeological tours like the one we'd taken the day before: thanks to him, we met a priest trained as an archaeologist who explained in detail how much political and ideological manipulation lay behind that work of historical storytelling. Then Abu Hassan took us to see the homes that the settlers had just seized from the Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, throwing out their inhabitants (including Mohammed El-Kurd's family) along with most of the furniture and everything inside: refrigerators, blankets, clothes, children's notebooks... When we arrived, the settlers who were then living in one of the expropriated homes came out and started throwing objects at us, shouting, "Go away! Go away!"

At the end of the tour, Abu Hassan took us all to lunch. To the Mihbash, of course.

While we were eating, noticing how shocked I was by what we'd just seen, he asked me, "But why are you here? Are you tourists?"

“I came for an interview,” I replied. “I hope I can.”
move to Jerusalem to work with UNRWA.»

He immediately thundered: "These vultures from the United Nations! It would have been better when you weren't here, because you don't do anything, your presence makes no difference, the only thing we've seen since you've been here is that life has become more expensive for everyone."

Feeling touched to the quick, I reacted rudely: "That's not true! Because if they hire me for this job, a human rights expert, it means the organization wants to give him much more space!"

I'll never forget that he didn't flinch at my words; looking me straight in the eye, he simply asked, " What do ***you*** want to do?"

A question that, after so many years, I am perhaps still asking myself.
trying to answer.

Within a few weeks, in fact, I was offered the position I'd interviewed for, and so Max and I returned to Jerusalem, this time permanently. We immediately went to the Mihbash to look for Abu Hassan, who was there as always. Summer or winter,

Unless it's raining or snowing, the first thing you see when you arrive at the Mihbash is his silhouette from behind, smoking ***shisha*** and looking out over the old city.

Since then, we've taken many more tours with him, we've begun to learn his story, and through him, we've learned a lot about Palestinian culture. Abu Hassan had a privilege: as a Jerusalemite, he could move freely throughout Palestine and Israel.

Palestinians, in fact, are divided according to four different identification systems: those with Israeli citizenship living in Israel (also known as "'48 Palestinians" and "Israeli Arabs," a term hated by Palestinians); residents of East Jerusalem (EJ), permanent residents but without Israeli citizenship; Palestinians from the West Bank (WB) and the Gaza Strip, both generally possess identity cards, formally issued by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) but effectively controlled by Israel, which regulates their issuance, renewal, and revocation, thus determining their ability to move, work, and access services. Each group has different rights, especially in terms of travel, access to services, and legal status; thus, the status of Jerusalemites is distinct from that of residents of Gaza, the West Bank, or Israel: "According to Israeli law, Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are neither Israeli citizens nor residents of the West Bank. Instead, they are given precarious permanent residency status, which allows them to live and work in the city, benefit from social services provided by the Israel National Insurance Institute and national health insurance, and vote in municipal elections, but not in national ones," as Amnesty International states.

It was with Abu Hassan that – after passing yet another Israeli checkpoint – we took our first tour of Hebron. That day, he explained to us how the city was divided in two: one part, called H1, formally governed by the Palestinian National Authority, while the other, H2, was under Israeli military control, with some areas of the Old City closed to Palestinians. Over thirty thousand Palestinians live in H2, compared to seven hundred Jewish settlers who have an exclusive area in the center. The trip to Hebron was part of an "awareness-raising" tour that first stopped at the Ibrahim Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, a religious building itself divided in two to allow worshippers to access the Old City.

Muslims and Jews pray separately to the same figure: Ibrahim for Muslims, Abraham for Jews.

In 1994, an Israeli-American settler, Baruch Goldstein, entered that sacred site in military uniform, armed with a machine gun, and massacred twenty-nine Palestinians who were praying, wounding around a hundred. Eventually, someone managed to stop him, and he was attacked and killed. But beyond the carnage caused by his assault, this event sparked an uprising in the city: more than twenty Palestinians and four Israelis died in clashes with the Israeli army. Yet, the Israelis don't consider it a massacre, or simply don't remember it.

A solemn funeral was held for Baruch Goldstein, and his tomb in the occupied West Bank remains a place of pilgrimage. There have been many horrors like this for Palestinians in the decades since the occupation began, but many refuse to see, as if they refuse to understand.

Hebron is also home to one of the last remaining keffiyeh factories still in operation: some beautiful, hand-woven ones. Historically a merchant city, also famous for its ceramics and blown glass, it now lies slumped, battered and lifeless.

Hebron's main thoroughfare, Shuhada Street (meaning "the street of the martyrs"), once crowded and vibrant, has long been sealed off. Palestinians can live there, but not walk. The doors of homes and shops have been bricked up by the army, so many have built small bridges to get from one house to another. Absurd scenes can be seen: children, late for school, climb over the gates and are chased, scolded, or beaten by soldiers.

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Another trip we took with Abu Hassan was to Nablus, in the northern West Bank. All Palestinian cities have a medina, the historic part enclosed by walls, but Nablus is unique because it's located in a mountainous area: surrounded by mountains, it's very green, and it's famous for its olive oil, which is also used to make soap, and for knafeh , a traditional Palestinian dessert as well-known as it is delicious.

"The one in Nablus is a magical thing" several friends had told me

Jerusalem. And they were right. ***Knafeh*** is made with soft, sweet goat's cheese, covered with kataifi dough, a type of filo pastry formed into long strands, and drizzled with hot honey or syrup, rose water, or orange blossom water. It's baked in huge round pans, then cut into diamonds or triangles and eaten with tea within an hour of baking. Just watching it being made is an experience.

In Nablus, we also had the opportunity to meet and discuss various people, gaining a deeper understanding of the reality of the place. For example, we met some former political prisoners who had been arrested simply for protesting against the soldiers, demanding the freedom of their people, or for participating in so-called political activities.

They told us that the mayor of Nablus at the time, Adly Yaish, belonged to Hamas: an Islamic nationalist movement born in the 1980s from the political tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood during the first intifada. Over the years, Hamas has represented both a form of armed resistance against the Israeli occupation and the apartheid system, through the al-Qassam Brigades—responsible for numerous tragic attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers, culminating on October 7, 2023—and a political party. In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, defeating Fatah, the rival party founded in the late 1950s by Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian exiles. After the vote result was disavowed by the international community, violent clashes broke out between Hamas and Fatah, culminating in 2007 when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, which it still holds today despite widespread destruction, while Fatah governs the West Bank.

Abu Hassan and I also visited the Balata and Jenin refugee camps in the northern West Bank for the first time, even before I went there with the agency I worked for. After the Palestinians were driven from their homes in 1948 by Jewish militias who later joined the army of the newly formed State of Israel, these two camps became the largest in the occupied Palestinian territory. Some of the displaced people who flocked from the Galilee area or the Haifa coast moved to Lebanon, but many settled in Balata and Jenin, waiting for the day when they could return.

Return home. The first generation lived mostly like this, in tents, awaiting the fateful return. The second generation, however, were the resistance fighters: the first to understand that no one would help them.
Neither the Arabs nor the United Nations would ever free them from the camps, much less from the grip of the occupation. And so it became the cradle of armed resistance in the West Bank.

Palestinian resistance dates back to the British era. Resistance against Israel began in the late 1950s, when various resistance movements emerged, including Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). These later joined or federated into the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), becoming the backbone of the armed resistance. All these groups were deeply rooted in the refugee camps, which is why Balata and Jenin are among the areas routinely most affected by the Israeli army. We were able to witness all this from the inside, because the Jenin refugee camp still existed, although much of it had been destroyed by the Israeli army during the second intifada and then, with great sacrifice, rebuilt. Since January 2025, the camp has been heavily hit by Israeli bombing, and within a few weeks, approximately twenty thousand people have been left homeless.

We spoke at length about the Palestine of the past and the present with Abu Hassan, with whom we developed a close bond over time. Our friendship was a symbiotic process: he entered our lives and we entered his, respecting each other, but also accepting that there were things we instinctively didn't understand at first. Abu Hassan, in fact, didn't just take me to see the settlements in the West Bank; he accompanied me around the city and helped me understand which products came from the settlements and which didn't, what was best to buy in supermarkets to support the Palestinians and what not to buy at all. After a year, I had a fairly clear idea of who were the ordinary merchants and who were the "collaborators"—those doing business with the Israeli occupation, which enforced the sale of settlement products while prohibiting the entry into Jerusalem of Palestinian goods produced in the West Bank (not even in Gaza!).

Abu Hassan was one of the friends we consulted when we moved to Jerusalem to find out which of the houses they were offering us to rent had been taken from the Palestinians in 1948, so that we could avoid them.

In addition to the tours he gave us during our early days in Palestine, we always found him at the Mihbash and wondered if the place was his: we would later discover, over the years, that it wasn't his, but it was a second home for him.

We also enjoyed going there and bringing all our friends, even though the food wasn't the place's forte and the young men serving tables didn't seem particularly suited to the job. It took me a while to understand that if they sometimes behaved in an inhospitable manner, there was a reason; more than one, in fact. Not only did those young people come from traditional cultural backgrounds and find themselves having to serve alcohol or smile at people who were there, in their homeland, without truly understanding or respecting them; but they also all came from terrible situations and from major traumas that they still carried with them. In fact, the people who worked as cooks or waiters at the Mihbash weren't usually professionals, but young people who had difficult life experiences and for whom that place offered an opportunity.

Many Palestinians experience detention in Israeli prisons, often during the fragile stages of childhood and adolescence. Between 1967 and 2006, more than eight hundred thousand Palestinians, including minors, were arrested and detained by Israel, and, obviously, employment opportunities for those released from Israeli prisons are limited. Thus, in order to help these young people, Abu Hassan directed them, starting by having them work in what had become his headquarters. This is the reason for the shadows that surrounded some of the waiters at the Mihbash.

For me, Max, and our closest friends and colleagues, that place was a refuge, and we were happy to experience it as our meeting point, because we also considered it a very practical way to make our small contribution to the difficult life of Palestinians in East Jerusalem. It mattered little that the service wasn't Michelin-starred or that the smell of fried food mingled with ***shisha wafted in the air,*** which was the argument our friends sometimes used to protest and try to take us elsewhere: "Why do we always have to go to that place where they stink when we leave?"

the clothes? But, one way or another, Max always managed to convince them in the end.

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Among the various topics of our interminable conversations, one that kept recurring was undoubtedly detention. Subsequently, to write my second report to the United Nations —"Arbitrary Deprivation of Liberty in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: The Palestinian Experience Behind and Beyond Bars"—I had the opportunity to conduct much more in-depth research on the topic, which uncovered horrifying information. In this report, presented to the Human Rights Council in July 2023, I defined ***carcerality*** as the arbitrary and systematic deprivation of liberty: a system of large-scale confinement that suffocates every aspect of Palestinian life. Although Israel had once again refused me access to Palestine, to prepare the report, I conducted an investigation lasting over six months, revealing how this control occurs on three levels: physical (through checkpoints, walls, and the blockade of Gaza, turning that entire area into an open-air prison); bureaucratic (with a system of restrictions that regulates and limits every movement); and digital (thanks to surveillance technologies that constantly monitor the population).

Imprisonments often occur without charges or fair trials, and the Israeli justice system, which guarantees settlers civil rights, applies military law to Palestinians. Not to mention the absurd and degrading conditions to which children and young people are subjected, the specific forms of violence and blackmail suffered by women and LGBTQ+ people, and the fact that torture is still widespread in prisons. This is the scenario. Practices that clearly violate respect for human rights and should therefore be prosecuted as war crimes and crimes against humanity. What legitimacy can a legal system have that treats an entire population as a collective threat?

In addition to the numbers of the arrested Palestinian population – frightening data because, in any condition, arrest and imprisonment mark you forever.

I explored in particular the terrible reality of Israel's detention of minors.

The arrest of children is instrumental in repression, and is one of the weapons Israel uses to persecute Palestinians and deprive them of their fundamental rights. Persecution, that is, the "intentional and severe" deprivation of fundamental rights based on one's group identity, constitutes an international crime, recognized by the Rome Statute (which establishes the International Criminal Court, which has jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, war crimes, aggression, and genocide).

Arresting a child or young person—often in the dead of night—on charges such as throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, army vehicles, or settlers, and then harassing them and forcing them to provide information about people in their city or neighborhood, is an experience that will scar them forever, triggering a series of consequences in their lives. First of all, exposure to such violence, especially without the assistance of a parent or lawyer, leaves minors alone and vulnerable: abused, threatened, slapped, beaten, deprived of the ability to defend themselves. Often, they are chained by their hands and feet to chairs and held there for prolonged periods, experiencing pain, being prevented from using the bathroom, and even ridiculing them for it.

On several occasions, children were held in solitary confinement for more than two weeks. But United Nations standards on the treatment of prisoners state that solitary confinement for more than fifteen days is considered a form of torture and expressly prohibit it for adults, let alone minors. Children should not be imprisoned: prisons are no place for them, especially military ones, which is where Palestinians generally end up. Over the years, several international organizations have recommended that the Israeli military detention system respect children's rights. But in hindsight, this was a mistake. It should have simply been emphasized that children should not be arrested by soldiers, accused of vague crimes established by oppressive military orders, and should not be tried in military courts. Instead, the effort ended up being to make the occupation more "acceptable." But how could an occupation used as a tool of permanent oppression ever be considered acceptable?

Over the years, I've attended several trials involving minors, and I've witnessed their absurd brutality firsthand. The children were led into court in chains; I felt like I was reliving the scenes of slave labor in labor camps. Small, emaciated, exhausted, thrilled at the thought that, for the first time since their arrest, they would see their parents again, in these hearings that ultimately lasted a few minutes. The judge often didn't even look at them; he'd listen to the accusation—"He threw stones"—and then hand down his sentence. Two years in prison. Three years in prison. And so on. A generous judge, given that the sentence for stone-throwing for Palestinians is up to ten years (twenty if with the intent to harm someone).

After a nightmare like this, how can we be surprised that Palestinian children return home traumatized, unwilling to go out, afraid, bedwetting, and displaying disorders or violent behavior? We're talking about children as young as twelve, thirteen, and fourteen, but even younger are arrested. Children as young as five or six have been taken away by Israeli vans; perhaps not detained, but interrogated and then sent home (just search the internet to see this). The consequences are dramatic, and the message is very clear: "You are under our control. You are not free."

How can we talk about ***conflict,*** as a synonym of war, in a similar situation?

The conflict requires two vaguely comparable sides. Israel and Palestine are not: one is the occupier and the other the occupied, one is the colonizer and the other the colonized, placed in a condition of structural subordination and the victim of a system of control and segregation. No, this is not a conflict: at best, it can be seen as a conflict with humanity.

Furthermore, paradoxically, the oppression of the Palestinian people is compounded by all the actions of the Israeli occupation, including the Palestinian National Authority itself, a political institution created in 1993 following the Oslo Accords.

It is a pity that these agreements, signed between Israel and the PLO, in theory should have marked the first mutual recognition between the two parties and established a path towards the creation of the Palestinian state; but for the Palestinians they have not produced any concrete result, except the strengthening of the matrix of control that has made the occupation even more

more rapacious in its land acquisition and repression of Palestinian existence. The promised state was established and formally exists (it is even recognized by 135 United Nations countries), but in practice it has never materialized: the Israeli occupation has continued, expanding geographically, and settlements in the occupied territory have continued, exacerbating the oppressive measures.

But even if the Oslo Accords had been respected, they were still based on a strong asymmetry of power between the parties, which would have allowed Israel to maintain effective control of the territory, leaving the Palestinians only fragmented autonomy, lacking true sovereignty. This has been argued by many Palestinian and Israeli scholars, such as Edward Said, Tanya Reinhart, Ilan Pappé, and even by reports from organizations like the Israeli B'Tselem: while marking an important symbolic turning point, the Oslo negotiations did not challenge the architecture of Israeli control. This is why many believe that it was precisely these agreements that legitimized the occupation, transforming the Palestinian National Authority into an administrative body governing the population in some areas, but globally under Israeli surveillance and military domination. Indeed, beyond the explicit intent of exercising full civilian and security control over the major Palestinian cities (the so-called Area A) and solely overseeing civilian control in the peri-urban areas of the occupied territory (Area B), the PA's primary role, according to the Oslo Accords, is to maintain security coordination with Israel. But whose security? The answer is clear.

Many Palestinians see the PA as an obstacle to achieving self-determination; this unfortunately exacerbates the social and political fragmentation of Palestinians.

Today, more than ever, there are few alternatives for a Palestinian's future. Indeed, in carrying out basic life functions, clashing with Israelis is inevitable, and imprisonment or death are not uncommon. Even engaging in politics leads to the same outcome.

There are figures like Khalida Jarrar, a parliamentarian duly elected in 2006 as a member of the Palestinian National Council, who finds herself continuously under arrest for security reasons. In 2021, while she was in prison without charge or trial, Israel did not allow her to

not even go out for the funeral of his daughter, Suha, who died very young from a heart attack.

Detention by the Israeli army makes Palestinians political prisoners: they are not arrested for common crimes, but the charge, when it is issued, very often relates to the political situation.

There has always been a natural solidarity between society and prisoners, who are somehow seen as fighters. Helping one another and supporting the families of those in prison was first a priority for the Palestine Liberation Organization, and then for the Palestinian National Authority as well. At least until February 2025, when, under pressure from the United States, the PA suspended support for Palestinian prisoners and their families. This deprived many people of essential help: often, the heads of families are arrested, leaving the entire family unit without resources. This is why Abu Hassan was so keen to have those young men work at the Mihbash. It's true that resistance can be violent, and civilians must certainly be protected from violence at all times. I'm not here to justify any crime Palestinians may have committed against Israeli civilians during their long oppression. But a

reflection by Bertolt Brecht comes to mind that I find extremely fitting in this case, as in other situations of systemic and protracted oppression: "The river that sweeps everything away is known as violent, but no one calls the banks that stop it violent." The time has come to resolve violence by getting to the root, removing the causes that trigger it, which in Palestine are fundamentally oppression and apartheid.

George

What does it mean to live in Jerusalem?

> All in all it was all just bricks in the wall.
> All in all you were all just bricks in the wall.
>
> PINK FLOYD, ***Another Brick in the Wall (Part 3)***

For me, Jerusalem is an overly religious city, but very little spiritual: indeed, I've often had the impression that it is precisely there that one breathes the religion that undermines the spirit, despite the fact that so many people—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—experience it as the cornerstone of their faith.

Geographically, it's a city like many others; politically, however, it's divided in two, and if you know it well, it's a fragmented city, starting with Road Number One, a road that crosses it from north to south, serving as a dividing line between the predominantly Arab areas to the east and the Jewish ones to the west. Now urbanized and incorporated into the urban fabric (to the east, it passes near Damascus Gate, Sheikh Jarrah, Musrara, and so on), it was once an important physical dividing line, drawn by the 1948 war, but also a cultural and political one within the city, of which it retains strong symbolic and historical significance.

In 1947, the United Nations General Assembly approved the so-called Partition Plan, which envisaged the division of Palestine into two states, assigning approximately 55 percent of the territory to the future Jewish state (despite the fact that Jews constituted less than 35 percent of the population and de facto owned only 6 percent of the land) and the remaining 45 percent to the Palestinians, who individually or collectively at that time owned 94 percent of the land.

The plan was rejected by Palestinian leaders and Arab countries, who considered it unjust, and this led to a civil war, which later erupted into the 1948 conflict after the proclamation of the State of Israel.

The battles between Zionist militias and Palestinian and Arab forces focused on strategic points, including the road connecting Tel Aviv (at the time a settlement of Jews who had arrived from Eastern Europe to escape persecution) to Jerusalem: the future Road Number One.

During the conflict that broke out in May 1948, in what the United Nations had designated as the territory of the Jewish state, one of the crucial points was the area around the city of Latrun, the scene of violent clashes between Israeli troops and the Arab Legion, which had then intervened from Jordan.

After the 1949 armistice, the Green Line ceasefire was drawn right in that area, and in some sections Road Number One still follows it today, continuing to mark the separation between Palestinian neighborhoods such as Sheikh Jarrah and the opposite Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, across Road Number One, in the Israeli area of West Jerusalem.

In the United Nations partition plan, Jerusalem was envisioned as a ***corpus separatum,*** a city under international administration; but this never materialized. Israel had been assigned 55 percent of historic Palestine, but instead it took 78 percent, leaving the "Arab state" envisioned by the UN, and opposed by the Arabs themselves, with only 22 percent, thus seriously violating the terms of the partition. Clashes ensued between Zionist militias and Palestinian armed resistance, outright attacks on villages, especially Palestinian ones, and the expulsion or forced flight of approximately 750,000 Palestinians: the so-called Nakba.

Jerusalem was then divided in two: the West, under Israeli control, and the East, under Jordanian control, with the Old City located just beyond the former Green Line (the other name for Road Number One, from the color used to draw the armistice line with Jordan). The Old City is spectacular. Surrounded by ancient walls, it is made up of four quarters: the Armenian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

Just outside the Old City walls, on the Muslim Quarter side, is Salah al-Din Street, home to the Educational Bookshop, East Jerusalem's best-known bookstore: a point of reference for both foreigners like us and Palestinians with access to Jerusalem.

On the ground floor of the Educational Bookshop is the actual bookshop, which has (or rather, ***had,*** for as long as they allowed it) a large selection of modern and historical books on Palestine. Downstairs is a conference room and a small café where, when there were no events, homemade cakes were served. Upstairs was a space for studying and working. Max —who at the time was working remotely with an English organization—was always there: it had become his office when we moved there from Geneva. One day, noticing that the person who often sat working next to him had countless windows open on his computer screen at once, Max asked him, "How do you manage to work like this?" That's how he met George, and that's how their (and our) friendship was born, to the detriment of the other café patrons: with their powerful voices, they were soon dubbed the quintessential "noise polluters."

George is a Palestinian engineer from Jerusalem; a brilliant, highly intelligent, and extremely warm person. He studied in the United States, worked for years in Silicon Valley, and in the early 2000s, after living there for twenty years, he decided to leave everything behind and return home to help build what he hoped would become the Free State of Palestine.

In Palestine, George had difficulty maintaining an occupation worthy of his education, especially because of his independence of thought.
He had a hard time working with international organizations, where a Palestinian was expected not to talk about occupation and apartheid. The idea was more or less: "If you want to work with us [i.e., wealthy Westerners], you have to conform to our etiquette." But George was a nonconformist, and above all a man of principle, difficult to bend to the depoliticization of Western ***donors .*** And of course, working with Israelis was even more complicated, because even the most progressive always maintained a certain sense of superiority towards the Israelis.

Palestinians and he could not bear the idea of feeling like the beneficiary of other people's generosity.

For a Palestinian, living in Jerusalem means grappling daily with the implications of the structural subordination imposed by Israel. Starting with terminology that we tend to take for granted, but isn't.

The opposition between "Arabs" and "Jews," for example, can already be seen as a reflection of Zionist thought, which tends to simplify this terrible situation of apartheid in ethno-religious terms, obscuring the political, colonial, and national dimensions. Referring to Palestinians generically as "Arabs"—as often happens in Israeli school textbooks or in mainstream media around the world—contributes to denying their national identity: referring to Palestinians simply as "Arabs" risks insinuating the idea that Palestine does not exist and that Palestinians are temporary guests or, worse, a fabrication.

What can it mean for a Palestinian in Jerusalem to live all day, every day, immersed in this tension that touches everything, including the most seemingly banal words that, on closer inspection, are not so banal at all?

Our dearest friends, who marked our lives and helped us navigate the complex space of the city in those early years—besides Abu Hassan—were George and Ibrahim: two complementary souls. One Christian, one Muslim; George always full of energy, a freshly opened bottle of champagne; Ibrahim serious, studious, and often silent.

Ibrahim came from the Husseini family, one of the most important in Palestine, descendants of the Prophet and especially of the Mufti of Jerusalem, a figure heavily discredited by a narrative aimed at delegitimizing his political role during the years of the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine and reducing his figure to his controversial closeness to Nazi Germany, obscuring his centrality in the Palestinian resistance to the British Mandate and Zionism. At that time, Ibrahim lived in a huge, beautiful house in the center of East Jerusalem, worked as a journalist for a Western broadcaster, and had to struggle every day with the need to measure every word: telling the truth about Israel meant risking not being heard.

being published or, worse, losing or being forced to leave your job, as happens to many.

I don't know how I could have lived without them and my other friends during those intense years in Jerusalem, when I often felt discouraged.
After six months I already wanted to leave, because I couldn't tolerate the heaviness, the oppressive energy, that forced and persistent separation from the fluid and impassable borders that is apartheid, even if at the time I didn't yet have that word.

Every day I just had to cross the city to make trips that I
they left you speechless.
I remember that a few days after meeting Ibrahim, we went with him to the Western Wall: one of Judaism's most sacred sites, revered as the only surviving section of the wall that once surrounded the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Some say it was destroyed by the Romans in the first century AD, while others say it never existed, or never existed at all. Adjacent to the Western Wall is the area where the Temple Mount, one of Islam's holiest sites, stands.

Like many sites in Jerusalem, this place also carries a history of violence and dispossession. In June 1967, with the Israeli military occupation of East Jerusalem, the Moroccan Quarter, directly opposite the Western Wall, was placed under occupation control. Overnight, the entire ten-thousand-square-meter area was razed to the ground, and approximately six hundred and fifty residents were displaced, stripped of their homes to make room for Jewish pilgrims. This is a story that is not told to the thousands of tourists and worshippers who visit this holy site every year.

Max, Ibrahim, and I were walking through the Old City that day, sharing these stories and trying to imagine what the place must have been like back when the old houses still stood, when, at a certain point, we noticed a man speaking rather excitedly, like a pot vendor trying to attract the crowd's attention, in front of a small group of people who looked like tourists. The scene intrigued me, because usually no one is so exuberant in Jerusalem. None of the people I saw every day, at least: not the Palestinians, always with their heads bowed to be as inconspicuous as possible, nor the ultra-Orthodox Jews who always rush through the Arab Quarter.

to go and pray at the Western Wall, nor the soldiers, stationed everywhere to monitor the lives of Palestinians. When he noticed me staring, the guy looked at me with a toothy grin and open arms, like Kate Winslet on the bow of the ***Titanic,*** then, in a strong Australian accent, he said, ***"Welcome to Israel!"***

"Occupied Palestine. This part is occupied Palestine," I told him.
with a tiny little smile.

He retorted sharply: “Palestine doesn’t exist, this is Israel.”

At that point Ibrahim, who was walking next to me, asked him
animatedly: "And if Palestine doesn't exist, what am I?"

"You don't exist," the man replied without batting an eyelid: a man we would discover years later was the leader of one of the most aggressive settler organizations. We had just, unknowingly, stumbled upon a man who, if we lived in a just world, would have been in prison long ago.

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George and Ibrahim weren't guides, but going out with them meant exploring the old city with new eyes. We often spent hours chatting in the beautiful garden of the Austrian Hospice, a facility for pilgrims where many young Austrians worked. Or we'd go together to the Mihbash, the bar where Abu Hassan always stayed, and at one point he'd even become actively involved in the management of the place.

In East Jerusalem, there weren't many places open in the evenings, but during the day there were plenty of places to have breakfast. On Saturday mornings, Max liked to wake up slowly, so I, being an early riser, often went with George to Salah al-Din Street, to a little place accessed by a narrow staircase. In the basement, there was a very simple place, with kitchen tiles on the walls, white plastic tables, black and white chairs, an old refrigerator for drinks, and a stand with a fryer where you could get hot food. There we had the classic Palestinian breakfast: ***hummus, hummus basar*** (served hot, with meat) for George, tomatoes, olives, cucumbers, various types of cheese with olive oil, the inevitable quintal of bread to dip in the oil, and ***zaatar.*** I remember that in the last days I spent in Jerusalem, I was in the middle of the

It was my first pregnancy and I had a crazy craving for spicy foods, so I gorged myself on hot chickpea cream that I ate with ***filfil akhdar,*** spicy green peppers, instead of bread (which earned me the nickname ***Ghazaouia,*** "woman from Gaza," among my friends, since these peppers are very popular there) and the owners were terrified that I might get sick in there: they feared an Israeli raid because of a pregnant Italian woman who was at risk of poisoning in their restaurant.

Sometimes—always with George, Ibrahim, and Abu Hassan—we'd go out in the evenings in West Jerusalem. We'd go to a place called Toy Bar, one of the city's rare meeting points for young Israelis and Palestinians, where dance parties sometimes turned into parties where people would dance on tables until the early hours. Everything took place within a few streets; not far away was the Diwan, which means "sofa" in Arabic, a disco bar with a DJ and plenty of space to let loose. After all the tension, dancing was liberating, but I would never go somewhere my Palestinian friends weren't allowed in, and this was a kind of free zone. Besides, Amir, the Israeli guy at the entrance, knew Abu Hassan, and that was enough to make us welcome as if we were the pasha with his entourage in tow.

Of course, there were often Israeli soldiers, but it must be kept in mind that almost all Jewish Israeli citizens become soldiers at some point. For Jews, but not for Palestinians living in Israel, conscription is mandatory: it lasts three years for men and two for women. After conscription, one can be recalled to service until age forty, with few exceptions. Israelis who refuse to serve in the army, as conscientious objectors, can be imprisoned, sometimes for months.

Then there was Uganda, a place opened by Palestinians in 1948, also in West Jerusalem – and which closed its doors shortly after our departure from Jerusalem – whose name was a provocation: Uganda was one of the places that at the beginning of the twentieth century had been proposed for the settlement of Zionist Jews and the creation of a Jewish state, before the possibility of establishing the State of Israel in Palestine materialized during the British Mandate of Palestine (1920-1948).

Among the many places we went for a walk with George, Talbiya and Baka remain unforgettable for me: two contiguous areas in the heart of
West Jerusalem where today, among tree-lined avenues and cafes that would seem

In any Western city, you'll find some wonderful homes. Elegant, unique homes, built between the 1920s and 1930s, blending Arab style with Ottoman and European influences by wealthy Palestinian families. This was the affluent part of the city where Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together, before the war separated them and before the arrival of European Zionism.

Most are built of light stone—the cream-colored Jerusalem stone that glows with golden reflections at sunset, giving rise to the nickname "the golden city"—with large arched windows, often framed by wooden shutters, and high ceilings. Many overlook small internal gardens with stone benches and colorful tile floors, now hidden behind modern gates from which a few tufts or rebellious branches of bougainvillea, fig trees, and lemon trees peek out. Some retain their original doors, sturdy, hand-carved, with brass handles, and inside you can still find the ceramic floors decorated with geometric shapes or floral motifs, the wall niches, the vaults, and the fireplaces chosen by those who built them. But after 1948, most of these homes were raided by Zionist militias, emptied, and their owners forced to flee, hoping to soon return. But no; seventy-seven years later, with the houses still there, back, out of the question.

One day, while we were walking, George showed us the outside of the house that had been expropriated from his grandmother. So I asked him, “Do you want us to try ringing the bell and get them to open it, so you can at least see it from the inside?”

But he gave me a firm no: "Let's forget it. I've already tried, and I won't tell you how they treated us. Now they're the ones who live there, or someone who pays their rent, because often these 'new owners' don't even live in our homes anymore."

I've heard this same story many times. Palestinians who manage to return to the places of their childhood, passed down through the memories of displaced parents or grandparents—the survivors of the Nakba—and, when they arrive, they often find nothing. Sometimes the building has been razed to the ground, other times new structures have taken its place; but perhaps what happened to George is even more painful: returning and seeing your family home still standing, trying to enter even just to look at it once in your life, and being rudely turned away by the people who live there.

who may not even be the new owners, but tenants, as he explained to me. Many of these houses, in fact, are often uninhabited, because so many Israeli Jews have dual citizenship and live abroad. I even knew people who worked for international organizations and had rented houses that had belonged to Palestinians who had become refugees in 1948: something abhorrent to me, but unfortunately, it doesn't surprise me all that much, because expatriates, of which Max and I were part, more than ineffable bearers of peace, are often so removed from reality that they don't even feel the breath of the land they tread.

Without any real knowledge of the places where they lived, I noticed that the idea of being there in the guise of the ***white savior*** prevented many of my colleagues and friends, especially those who worked for the United Nations, from questioning themselves, and I began to see in their work and in the very fact of living on that land a part of the problem they had ideally come to solve.

Indeed, even though Talbiya and Baka are objectively beautiful areas, full of charming bars and restaurants, for me they have always represented a place of internal conflict. Because cultural appropriation is so strongly felt there, starting with the strange fusion of Palestinian cuisine and Eastern European influences. ***Hummus, baba ganush, falafel,*** olive oil and ***zaatar are always on the menu,*** alongside turnip soup and cabbage soup. Of course, the idea of a gastronomic fusion between Palestinians and Israelis would be interesting, if it didn't inevitably carry with it an aftertaste of apartheid, if Israel weren't the country that more than any other seeks to annihilate Palestinian identity and demonizes it in the process. Therefore, for me, Talbiya's cuisine isn't fusion, but rather symbolizes the normalization of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, which is also expressed through the misappropriation of what is and remains Palestinian culture. Barring a miracle, I fear it will take decades to eliminate the sense of privilege and abuse that now permeates everything, including restaurant menus.

For this reason, I believe that, on the other side of the city, East Jerusalem – an integral part of the West Bank under Israeli military occupation – represents a sort of colonial frontier: a reality marked by the constant encounter-clash between the local Palestinian population (Armenian, Christian, Muslim) and the work of Judaization, that is, of progressive imposition

of Jewish-Israeli presence, control, and culture, which touches every aspect of daily life. This is not to deny Jerusalem's strong Jewish heritage, given how many Arab Jews lived in pre-Israel Jerusalem. But, as many historians, including Israelis, such as Menachem Klein, write, the communal life of Arab Jews on the one hand and Muslims and Christians on the other was compromised by the spread of Zionism from the first half of the twentieth century onward. Those wounds have never healed; or rather, not yet.

Here arises one of the most complex and sensitive questions for most people without a thorough understanding of Palestinian history. It's a question we've often addressed, in conversations and walks with our Palestinian friends and, later in life, with Israeli friends: who are the true ***indigenous people*** of those places? Saying that Palestinians (identified as non-Jews who live, or whose history originates, in that part of the land we call Holy) are indigenous doesn't actually mean that Jews aren't.

In the late nineteenth century, as the Ottoman Empire began its decline and a segment of European Zionism emerged, identifying plans to create a Jewish state, centered on Jewish immigration and the political and cultural control of the local population, historic Palestine was home to a population with a vast Muslim majority, with Christian and Jewish minorities: they were all "Palestine Arabs." Following persecution in Eastern Europe and the rampant anti-Semitic discrimination across the continent that led to the horror of the Holocaust, thousands of Jews gradually emigrated to what was first Ottoman territory and then the British Mandate. This represented a significant step forward for the Zionist colonial project, whose founding fathers included the Austrian Theodor Herzl, the Russians Chaim Weizmann and Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky, and the Pole David Ben-Gurion, who in 1948 became the first prime minister of the State of Israel.

Aliyah, a term meaning “return” and used to describe Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, became central to the Zionist movement as early as the late 19th century.

So it is correct to say that there was a Jewish community in Palestine that pre-existed Zionism (equal to or less than 10 percent of the population at the time); it is correct to say that most of the Jews who went

In Palestine, before and immediately after the creation of the State of Israel, especially Holocaust survivors, had few options because many Western countries proved reluctant to welcome them; thousands found themselves without refuge, with communities destroyed and families decimated. It is equally fair to mention that today, many of the Israelis living in the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, occupying Palestinian homes and lands, have American, Belgian, French, Australian, and Canadian names and accents. Often, neither they nor their parents were born in Israel, but come from cities where they often and willingly remain: even though they live abroad, they retain ownership or control of properties in the occupied territory, contributing to the systematic dispossession of Palestinians.

Living in Jerusalem also means walking down the street and seeing a family's personal belongings piled up on the sidewalk, while someone enters their home as if nothing had happened.

There are various ways for Israelis to acquire Palestinian homes. There's nothing wrong with wanting to buy property, per se, but the point is that in Jerusalem, as elsewhere, it's not just individuals who fall in love with a house and decide to buy it, but organizations operating to pursue a specific political agenda of Judaizing what remains of Palestine. One of the symbols of this system, and one of the most aggressive, is Daniel Lauria: the same person with whom my friend Ibrahim and I had that spat at the Western Wall. Years later, I recognized him in a documentary on settlers, in which he proudly explains his commitment to "facilitating" the sale of Palestinian homes and land to help the return of Jews. In a documentary describing the work of Ateret Cohanim, the organization led by Lauria, another settler is filmed in a scene that has gone viral in which Muna El-Kurd, Mohammed's twin sister, tells him, "You're stealing my house!" to which he unashamedly replies, ***"If I don't steal it, someone else is going to steal it."*** And with people like Lauria around, who can blame him?

Ateret Cohanim essentially arranges to evict Palestinians – often with highly questionable property titles – or to convince them to sell their

their homes. Some agree to do so out of desperation, only to be ostracized by the community, then secretly sell their property and flee abroad; while others are simply chased away.

Even when acquisitions are legal, they remain part of an occupation, because they employ oppressive tools. There were settlers right above our house in Jerusalem, and their presence was always visible with security guards, Israeli flags, and replicas of giant menorahs balanced on the rooftops... Even Ariel Sharon had bought a house in East Jerusalem, and it wasn't on a side street, but in a highly visible spot, a clearing near Damascus Gate where I passed on my way to the Austrian Hospice and where more than once I witnessed brutal searches and beatings of young Palestinians by Israeli soldiers. It was crucial that that house be located in a transit area, precisely because it was meant to be a symbolic building.

This also contributes to the constant tension in Jerusalem. When you walk through the Arab Quarter of the Old City to the Western Wall or the Temple Mount, your gaze rises to the sky and encounters enormous Israeli flags and Jewish symbols on houses that until recently had been occupied by Palestinians. For a Palestinian, the possibility of returning home to find settlers inside, as has happened to so many, is a source of constant anguish.

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Beyond its many charms—the bustling life of its alleys crowded with shops and worshippers on their way to prayer, the magic that embraces you when you gaze upon it from the heights of its mighty walls, from a rooftop or terrace, perhaps during the hour of Arab prayer, when captivating chants rise from every minaret—Jerusalem has always instilled a sense of melancholy in me. Both when I lived there and every time I returned, I was happy to be there, yet at the same time I felt an emptiness, an inner cold. Each time I set foot there, it was an increasingly heavy blow. Despite being a vibrant city, it's as if something had been torn from it that has never returned. And the city's Palestinian population is particularly distressed.

Jerusalem has always been an important center for the life of the Palestinian people; not only for religion, but also because, at least until the construction of the separation wall that Israel erected in the West Bank, it was a commercial crossroads that served as a bridge between the north and south of the area. The other key points are Nablus and Hebron, but Jerusalem was the central hub toward which all converged before the 2000s.

Today it has been cut off, closed off by the wall (which a 2004 opinion from the International Court of Justice deemed unlawful and ought to be dismantled, without this decision having any concrete effect). So today Palestinians in Jerusalem can travel to the West Bank, but those living in the West Bank can enter the city only with permits issued by Israel, which are often difficult if not impossible to obtain.

This catastrophically affected the local economy, because herders, Bedouins, and many Palestinians engaged in rural and artisanal activities were tied to city trade, and Jerusalem was a hub for the sale of, for example, dairy products, which were distributed from there throughout the region. Now it's all over. As Amnesty International also highlighted in its 2022 report "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians," Palestinians live under distinct jurisdictions and subject to strict permits that separate them from each other and isolate them from their lands and families.

Getting Palestinian products into the city has become so complicated that merchants end up selling those from the settlements. I remember this surprising me at first, but it's just another aspect of that schizophrenic reality, difficult to navigate.

Starting in October 2023, with increasing restrictions, attacks, abuses, and the absence of visitors, almost every Palestinian shop I knew closed. Tourism has drastically decreased; perhaps a few orange and pomegranate juice stalls remain open for the few pilgrims who still visit the city, but what about the rest? In Jerusalem, many Palestinian families, working in hospitality and catering, depend almost exclusively on international tourism. I remember that even ten or fifteen years ago, it was very rare to see Israelis venturing into the Arab areas of the city. Indeed, if you take a taxi in West Jerusalem, there's no guarantee that the driver will agree to go all the way to East Jerusalem, fearing possible attacks. May these fears be justified.

Founded or not, they make Jerusalem a "naturally" divided city: like certain lakes where currents of water of different colors flow side by side without ever mixing. But here, only the appearance of naturalness is apparent. The essence is that of a regime of separation, racial segregation, or, better yet, ethnoreligious segregation. Apartheid.

I left Jerusalem at the end of 2012, with my daughter Leila in my womb.
Max had left shortly after the end of the summer to move to Washington; while waiting to join him, I stayed as long as my pregnancy allowed. I waited until the house was empty of all the furniture and said goodbye on a late November morning, as the light cast the shadows of the branches of the pomegranate tree on the terrace onto my bedroom floor, where only the mattress remained.

This is how George found me: sitting on the floor, looking down at my bare feet, caressed by that play of shadows. He reached out a hand to help me up, and we went to have our last breakfast at Salah al-Din: the last missed cuddle for the restaurateur, who was fed up with me and my obsession with green peppers for breakfast. Then we stopped by to say hello to the Muna brothers, the owners of the Educational Bookshop, where I bought yet another stack of books before taking my leave, with George accompanying me through this series of goodbyes with his kind, sly smile. ***"Habibti"*** he affectionately called me whenever I said something stupid. When he was serious, he called me "Frenci," or ***"Kbire."*** From Jerusalem onward, I was Frenci ***Kbire*** ("tall") to differentiate myself from our other dear friend, Francesca Bombi. She, for all of us, was and remains Frenci ***Sghire*** ("little one").

After leaving Jerusalem, Max, George, and I saw each other again relatively quickly: in March, he was the first loved one, after Max and my mother, to hold Leila, on her second day of life, in a clinic in Washington. And over time, we never lost sight of "Uncle George," who continued to visit us in the United States and Italy, just as I always found a way to say hello to him every time I returned to Palestine, during the years of researching and writing my book on Palestinian refugees.

Then the genocide fell upon us all like a cleaver. We felt much less connected. After a year, George and I started writing to each other again.
He told me he'd had a breakdown, that he hadn't been feeling well, and perhaps even suffered a bit of depression; and after all, who doesn't feel depressed among Palestinians these days?

I, too, have had moments of collapse. I remember the first weeks of the genocide, between October and November 2023, when I often cried because I couldn't process all those deaths: two hundred, two hundred and fifty people a day, the children, the horrible stories I heard... I tried to resist, but in that period I wasn't there for anyone, sometimes not even for my children or my mother, whose mind was continuing to evaporate. Every morning I had to get up, count the dead, try to understand what had happened, verify the information, talk to other experts, answer calls from Gaza or the West Bank, answer as many requests from journalists as possible, remember to breathe. I have a vivid memory of one October morning when I was in Italy and gave an interview to the BBC with eyes that looked like those of a frog, so much had I cried since the early hours of the morning, watching the images of the destruction of Gaza, and unable to stem the malaise aroused by the inhuman cry of vengeance that continued to rise from the hordes of young soldiers in assault gear.

Months of pure apnea followed.

Then, little by little, it's as if I had to learn to create a wall between myself as a person and everything else, to be able to return to my life; but always a little halfway, always limping, accepting the idea that I have changed definitively, that I too have lost something that can never be restored.
return.

Meanwhile, the Educational Bookshop also hit the headlines in early 2025. The Israeli army raided the store twice, arresting the owners and ransacking the shelves. They took all the books with a Palestinian flag on the cover or anything the military disliked, including a copy of an Israeli magazine, a children's coloring book confiscated as evidence of incitement to terrorism, and the essay on the legal status of Palestinian refugees under international law, ***Palestinian Refugees in***

International Law, which I co-authored with Lex Takkenberg and published by Oxford University Press in 2020. Israeli settler colonialism, in fact, goes to the trouble of repressing even the creation of a collective consciousness, both Palestinian and international, that highlights the reality of the occupation. Why else would they destroy places of culture, which, when all is said and done, are nothing more than spaces of peaceful resistance to the occupation?

Living in Jerusalem also means this.

Alon

How can you recognize an anti-Semitic person?

> ***Apartheid*** was a new word but the idea was old. It literally means "separateness" [...]. What had existed more or less ***de facto*** had to relentlessly assert itself ***de jure.*** Segregation [...] had to be consolidated into a system monolithic, diabolical in detail, inescapable in scope, and overwhelming in power.
>
> NELSON MANDELA

Today more than ever, in a situation where Palestinians—a people currently victim of genocide—as well as people fighting for justice are being accused of anti-Semitism, it is necessary to understand what is meant by "anti-Semitism" and the dangers that can arise from its improper use.

By the time I became the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territory in May 2022, I had already been subjected to a disgraceful barrage of insults, and several reports had even been drawn up against me, mostly by an organization as lacking in spirit and understanding of human rights as it is effective in systematically defaming anyone who dares to express criticism of the State of Israel. Such is UN Watch: in theory, a body created to monitor compliance with the principles of the United Nations Charter, promoting human rights and government accountability within the UN system. In practice, a veritable tool for Israeli propaganda within the United Nations. But those familiar with Israel are not surprised.

In the first summer of my term I was invited to hold a hearing at the Foreign and Community Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and during the presentation the then president Piero Fassino

He intervened, judging my interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian issue "one-sided" and urging me to be more impartial. In short, he thought I was biased.

With the naiveté of a novice, I was completely taken aback. How could I be biased? Why on earth would a political figure call on an international official who had kindly accepted an invitation to report on a situation of such extreme gravity to be impartial? Moreover, I simply couldn't understand: why would they first invite me, and then attack me? The issue sowed chaos within the Commission at the time, with Laura Boldrini and others rising up to defend me, and eventually it became public knowledge.

A series of open letters followed between Fassino and me, with various connections through then-President of the Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico. And it was precisely in the midst of all this correspondence that I met Alon Confino, an Italian-Israeli university professor who taught History and Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was director of the Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies in the United States.

Alon was following the story in the Italian newspapers and wrote to me saying: "I'm witnessing what's happening. It's a disgrace, and I'd like to help you. Let me know if I can write something."

And so he did: he wrote a beautiful open letter in English, and I helped him translate it, since he didn't feel confident doing it alone, even though he spoke splendid Italian. He submitted it to "Repubblica," which, however, didn't publish it; the same went for other newspapers to which he had sent it. In the end, his open letter never came out, but from that occasion, a strong collaboration and a beautiful friendship were born between us, which lasted until the last days of Alon's life, in June 2024.

Early in our acquaintance, Alon Confino brought a very important issue to my attention, introducing me to the internal debate among Jewish scholars around the world over the definition of antisemitism proposed by the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance).

In truth, anti-Semitism should already be defined in itself: it consists of hatred, discrimination, prejudice, violence against Jews because they are Jews, exactly as Islamophobia is hatred,

discrimination, prejudice, violence against Muslims because they are Muslims, and so on.

This organization, however, in 2016 proposed a specific, verbose, complex, and mellifluous definition of antisemitism: "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews that can be expressed as hatred of Jews. Verbal and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jews or non-Jews and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions, and toward buildings used for worship." This seemingly innocuous definition is accompanied by eleven practical examples linking antisemitism to criticism of the State of Israel and its policies.

The danger of this definition is that it allows any criticism of the State of Israel to be deemed antisemitic. In short, since Israel defines itself as a "Jewish state," criticizing it would be antisemitic, whether or not there are documented violations attributable to Israel.

This equation is harmful, and I was neither the first nor the only one to argue it. As Alon often told me, confusing criticism of the State of Israel with anti-Semitism is extremely risky for both Palestinians and Jews themselves: because, by reasoning in these terms, one immediately associates all Jews with the State of Israel. But that's not the case. Alon was Israeli, he loved Israel deeply, and like him, there are many American or European Jews who want nothing to do with the crimes of the State of Israel. Many of these Jews are anti-Zionist, some not openly, others not at all.

Furthermore, improperly equating anti-Zionism with criticism of the State of Israel ignores ***true*** anti-Semitism, which is repugnant but still exists: that of the right-wing, which views Jews—like Arabs or homosexuals—as impure, to be eliminated from the Western system in order to preserve its purity. It seems that the idea of a superior race, transformed into a political ideology of extermination by Nazi Germany a century ago, did not disappear with Hitler, as Israeli scholar Raz Segal, professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton University in New Jersey, says. This ideology has hidden and transformed, but it still pulses in the veins of our societies, even Western ones that proclaim themselves to be founded on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Raz Segal highlighted how concepts of racial supremacy have resurfaced in contemporary contexts, emphasizing the use of rhetoric that dehumanizes Palestinians and invokes ideologies of racial supremacy.

The myth of race, if you look closely, wasn't even invented by Hitler, but he turned it into a political banner of destruction and extermination. It is the black soul disguised in white that hovers throughout five hundred years of colonization, beginning in 1492. What I was taught as a child to call the "discovery of America" is actually the event that marks the beginning of the end for thousands of peoples of the American continent.
With those three caravels, Christopher Columbus became the instrument of Isabella, Queen of Spain's greed for power, as she sought to seize gold and resources. Arriving in the "New World" (a land of peoples with age-old traditions such as the Iroquois, Apache, Navajo, Sioux, Cherokee, Inuit, Inca, Mapuche, Muisca, Guarani, and many others), Columbus marked the beginning of the exploitation of Latin America, followed by the conquest of North America, where the Pilgrim Fathers, fleeing famine in Europe, appropriated lands inhabited by hundreds of indigenous peoples who today risk being erased from history. A clear example of this is the fact that the history of a country founded on genocide, like the United States, is told beginning on July 4, 1776, when the Thirteen Colonies seceded from Great Britain with the Declaration of Independence. This event would see the birth of the United States as a sovereign nation, leaving aside the fact that in the first 150 years of European colonization of the Americas alone, starting in 1492, it is estimated that tens of millions of indigenous people died, exterminated by military conquest, slavery, deportation, and the spread of diseases brought by Europeans, to which they had no immunity.

These genocides, which in many regions caused a demographic collapse of 70 to 90 percent of the original population, are rarely discussed, or are recounted in a reassuring manner, normalizing the abomination. The entire Western filmography (up to ***Soldier Blue*** and ***Dances with Wolves)*** has fictionalized the genocide of the so-called "Redskins," a term itself racist and derogatory. History is written by the victors, who are often also the massacrers. But those who remain carry their history written within them, it travels in their DNA, and

As soon as they have the opportunity to pick up a pen, they correct it: for example, ***The Rediscovery of America,*** by Ned Blackhawk, is one of the most illuminating books I have read in this long year and a half of genocide in Palestine, and it is nothing other than a history of what preceded and then led to the creation of the United States from the perspective of its indigenous peoples.

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Today, no one (or almost no one, at least in theory) could deny the interpretation of European colonialism towards the Native American peoples, since many centuries have passed and time continues to illuminate certain aspects with ever greater clarity. However, the discussion seems to become much more difficult when dealing with situations affecting the present.

I talked a lot about these topics with Alon. After our initial email and phone exchanges, we began a very beautiful, intense collaboration. I had him and his close friend Amos Goldberg—professor of Jewish History and Contemporary Judaism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and one of the few Israelis to have openly denounced the genocide perpetrated against the Palestinians after October 7—read the report on self-determination I was preparing for the United Nations in 2022, and they both said to me: "Good luck! The problem is not how you construct the idea of the right to self-determination, but rather the fact that you blame Israel for being a colonial regime."

«But it is...»

«Yes, we know it is, but be prepared, because they will unleash it on you All."

Indeed, it happened. My visit to Palestine, scheduled for December 2022, was blocked, and the attacks against me, accusing me of anti-Semitism, never abated, despite the outcry in my defense from many parts of the world, from academics to journalists to activists. Progressive Jews, always at the forefront.

Thanks to Alon and Amos, among other things, I immersed myself in a world of Israeli, English, American Jewish scholars with whom a collaboration was born to counter what was happening at the United Nations,

where pro-Israel pressure groups were pushing forward with all their might, insisting that the Secretary-General adopt the United Nations definition of anti-Semitism that automatically included criticism of Israel.

Those pressures, where applied successfully, had real effects.

Twenty-five of the twenty-seven European states have now adopted this definition in some form. It is not legally binding, but it has become a standard used by governments, universities, and even businesses. In Italy, the Council of Ministers adopted the IHRA definition in 2020. Lufthansa and many other airlines have adopted it.

What does all this mean? It means the possibility that if you wear a keffiyeh or a Palestinian flag pin, you could one day be considered subject to sanctions, since under those parameters, the flag or other symbols of Palestinian identity could be seen as an affront to the State of Israel or a denial of its existence. We have reached an unprecedented level of oppression and denial of reason.

Of course, we are also witnessing an unprecedented level of awareness.
Never before has there been such sustained questioning of the State of Israel. Never before has there been such a mobilization. I'm not just talking about the streets filling up, but also about major legal actions underway, such as those supported by various international organizations against the governments of the countries where they operate—currently the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands—for supporting and transferring weapons to Israel during a period when it was committing extremely serious international crimes against Palestinians; or like the Hind Rajab Foundation, the organization that demands justice against all Israeli soldiers who have been found guilty of involvement in war crimes and acts of genocide.

Yet, in many countries, attempts are being made to block these legal proceedings, precisely because they are accused of being "anti-Semitic." So, on the one hand, there is certainly greater knowledge and awareness, but on the other, there is also growing repression: a symptom of a structural weakness in the system of global oppression to which Palestinians are subjected. And this is happening not only at the hands of Israel, but also in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere.

Australia, in Europe, where Palestinians are often discriminated against precisely because their very existence could be harmful or an embarrassment to the State of Israel.

The logical distortion, the lack of rationality, is evident. At times, it almost seems like a stubborn refusal to understand, a display of inability to delve deeper. Perhaps because understanding forces action.

I'm speechless when I read certain articles that talk about "hate-filled Palestinians." But who today wouldn't feel anger or pain at Israel's actions, the way these actions are conducted, and its ability to silence debate everywhere?

And in any case, whatever the feelings, they shouldn't guide political choices. The criterion must be legality: that is the yardstick that sets the limits of what politics can—or cannot—do.

When I befriended Alon, Amos, and other signatories of the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (an alternative to the IHRA and true to its premise: antisemitism is hatred of Jews because they are Jews) in 2022, faced with the threat of the IHRA definition being adopted by the United Nations, I decided to consult other Special Rapporteurs, those who could thematically help us understand how to address the issue: freedom of expression, freedom of association, racism, and the defense of human rights. The various Rapporteurs consulted with me and with Jewish scholars who were asking for our support against the dissemination of the IHRA definition, which in the meantime had been rejected even by its authors, given the shameless use it was being made of by Israel and pro-Israel pressure groups. Together, we decided to write to the UN Secretary-General and the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, who had been delegated to address this definition of antisemitism.

In a year, we've helped make the consultative process initiated by the UN slightly more democratic, open to progressive and critical voices. How could the United Nations adopt a definition that not only doesn't define, but is also extremely controversial and dangerous?

To date, that definition has never been officially adopted; furthermore, although the United Nations has continued to hold discussions and seminars with these pressure groups, in the meantime the

counter-pressure and the doors were opened to a group of scholars, including Alon Confino himself, Amos Goldberg and David Feldman, who went to confer with the United Nations several times.

In October 2022, a report by UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, E. Tendayi Achiume, made it clear that the IHRA definition, in addition to being challenged by leading experts on the subject, was extremely dangerous: "Its de facto influence on the policies and practices of governments and private actors has contributed to violations of human rights, including freedom of expression, assembly and political participation, among others."

Meanwhile, I was preparing for the visit to Palestine, scheduled for December. For the first time, after fourteen years (from 2008 to 2022) in which the Israeli government had never responded to the Special Rapporteurs' requests, I had decided to change tactics. Instead of asking for authorization, I simply informed them: "I will travel between this date and this date and will hold these meetings." Between the lines, I wanted the message to be clear: "You cannot stop me, because you are an illegitimate occupying power; therefore, I am going. I have coordinated with the Palestinians and am keeping you informed so that you can facilitate my mission as best you can."

After just one day, the Israeli authorities had already protested to the United Nations, complaining that I had not followed the rules, that I would still need their coordination to go to the occupied Palestinian territory, and indicating the procedures I had to follow.

No problem. I complete all the required procedures and proceed with organizing the mission. However, seven days before departure, an Israeli newspaper—known to many as the government's unofficial mouthpiece—gives great prominence to a story that had been carefully crafted as a veritable media bombshell.

At the heart of the story was the accusation that I was an unquestionable anti-Semite, as demonstrated by a post I had published on Facebook at the time of the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, which began on July 8, 2014, in which over two thousand people, including about five hundred children, died and eleven thousand were injured. My post contained an appeal for funding from the United Nations, which was then providing assistance to the affected population, and a criticism of the West for its rejection of the umpteenth anti-Semitic attack.

The Palestinian scourge remained inert, unlike African, Asian, and South American countries, arguing that Europe was gripped by guilt over the Holocaust and America by the Jewish lobby. The unfortunate choice of words in that post is quite evident: while it is true that a very strong pro-Israel lobby exists, and that many Jews may indeed be part of it, it is wrong to speak of a "Jewish lobby." This, in fact, overshadows the responsibilities of other groups in supporting Israel, such as Christian Zionists, for example, for whom the return of Jews to the Holy Land represents the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and whose religious fanaticism has reached dangerous proportions in America and elsewhere. Even more serious, at the time, was the lack of a necessary and indispensable distinction on my part between Zionist Jews – especially those who claim Jewish sovereignty from the seashore to the sea (a markedly discriminatory project and therefore prohibited by international treaties, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) – and Jews who oppose, or simply do not wish to be associated with, this political project.

Fundamentally, Israel does not represent all Jews, just as Italy, Spain, or the United States do not represent all Catholics.

It was December 15, 2022; I remember in detail every detail of that day when this news spread rapidly, generating a wide echo, and I suddenly saw my head as Special Rapporteur rolling down the hill and ending up in the mud. But once again, the very Israeli friends and comrades with whom months earlier I had embarked on a joint journey for the protection of fundamental rights, in Palestine and beyond, came to my aid. That same evening, connected to me by video conference, were Alon, Amos, Daniel Levy, and David Feldman, who had read the news and were happy to help me deal with the situation. I can still see before my eyes the image of Alon, in his clear and essential office in Massachusetts, saying to me: "Don't apologize, Francesca. ***You can't apologize. They will mop the floor with your face if you apologize."***

They'll wipe the floor with your face, if you apologize. ***"You will have to distance yourself from the words you used, which were infelicitous,"*** suggesting that I simply distance myself from the words I had used in the past, which had indeed been truly infelicitous. The main focus of the discussion, Alon insisted, absolutely had to remain

on Palestine, considering the systemic and structural violence to which Palestinians were (and are) subjected.

Alon was a master of words, sophisticated in both thought and expression, so the concept of ***infelicitous*** words was crucial to my public response, in which I expressed the very idea that the terms used then were not the same ones I would use now, especially given my mandate. That was also an opportunity to use the space created around that controversy as a useful opening to address the issue of anti-Semitism, the real thing, taking action against the shameless exploitation it was being made by many.

Alon's words, but also those of Amos and Daniel Levy, with whom I later formed a deep friendship, had strengthened my position, helping me build a shield around my commitment that still accompanies me today. From that moment on, countless shovelfuls of mud hurled at me by various pro-Israel pressure groups would continue to rain down on me, relentlessly.

Yet, the fact that I managed to hold my head high in the face of such fury on that occasion earned me the respect of many in civil society, including several progressive Jewish groups and many intellectuals who have since often mobilized in my support, against whatever accusations have rained down on me.

For example, Avi Shlaim, a renowned Israeli historian and professor at Oxford University, published a letter a few days after that media onslaught, writing: "The three main pillars of Judaism are truth, justice, and peace. Albanese embodies these values to an extraordinary degree. And there will be many Jews around the world who will be disturbed by Israel's betrayal of these fundamental Jewish values."

In those difficult days, his words had a political and personal meaning that I will never forget.

All of this only strengthened the collaboration and respect between Alon and I.

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In early 2023, the newspaper Altreconomia invited me to present my report on self-determination to the Italian Senate, and I proposed involving Alon. Despite pressure from the Israeli Embassy in Italy to cancel the event, and the resulting nervousness among the organizers themselves, I arrived in Rome excited to address this institutional moment in my country, having a figure of Alon's intellectual and human caliber at my side. Furthermore, I was thrilled to finally be able to meet him in person.

The afternoon before the event, we'd arranged to meet in front of the Feltrinelli bookstore on Largo Argentina: there I found this distinguished gentleman with an umbrella under his arm and lots of thick white hair, which gave him the air of someone who doesn't take himself too seriously. We hugged as if we were reuniting after a long time, and began walking. Our goal was to talk, and keep talking, wherever our feet took us.

We walked for a long time through the streets of the Jewish Ghetto, stopped by a bookstore, and spent a wonderful evening eating artichokes, drinking, and discussing music and books, together with some of my dearest friends. I remember that at the end of dinner, when we said goodbye, after sending a selfie to Amos, who was in Jerusalem at the time, Alon laughed and said to me, "I wonder if anyone noticed I was with you at dinner... Will I be okay walking through the Ghetto alone at night?"

The next morning we met near the Senate and we did our presentation.

They hosted us in a magnificent room, and we had the opportunity to discuss issues that were close to our hearts. It was a wonderful event, and I immensely appreciated not only the fact that Alon took the time to defend my reputation with his unquestionable authority, but also the words he used, which are completely unheard of in Italy regarding Palestine and Israel. Alon began his speech by discussing anti-Semitism, explaining its origins and evolution.

He recalled that the term was coined in 1879, marking a turning point in the understanding of hatred toward Jews, which from religious became racial and political. He then spoke about the theme that first allowed us to understand each other, namely the ideological use of the accusation of anti-Semitism.

He emphasizes how it is too often used to silence well-founded and legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism, thus diverting attention from Palestinian human rights. According to him, "the accusation of anti-Semitism is often an ideological weapon against individuals, academics, and journalists who dare to advocate for equal civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights for Palestinians or to denounce violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territory."

Alon also addressed the complex position of Israeli Jews, arguing that they can be both victims and aggressors, given that Israel, though born from the ashes of the Holocaust, today exercises oppressive rule over Palestinians. He criticized the politicization of the Holocaust, reiterating that it cannot be used to justify human rights violations. For this very reason, he insisted on the need to distinguish between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, arguing that "talking political about Zionism and Israel is not antisemitism; it's part of the conversation and debate ***we need*** to have." We must.

He felt it was his duty to denounce the apartheid to which the Palestinians were subjected, precisely in the name of his Judaism and his love for Israel.
Likewise, I feel it is my duty as well, as I observe this disturbing period in which Palestinians are being massacred and simultaneously blamed and vilified everywhere, along with those who defend and support them. I feel the responsibility of a European aware of what Europeans have done for centuries, and of an Italian aware that Italians were complicit in the Holocaust, in the name of a racist ideology, less than a century ago. I fear that such ideologies may resurface, and so I strive every day, with all the means at my disposal, to create a network that will eradicate them in the bud.

In my speech that day, alongside Alon, I spoke of self-determination as the right to exist as a people, a right that cannot be negotiated—as I wrote in the report, "violations of international law should not be subjected to negotiations, as this would legitimize what is illegal." I emphasized that for too long the Palestinian question has been reduced to a humanitarian crisis, rather than addressed as a political issue to be resolved in accordance with international law. Limiting ourselves to aid without addressing the structural causes of the crisis means perpetuating injustice, normalizing it, rather than doing everything we can to address it.

possible to eradicate it. Furthermore, I challenged the narrative that tends to present the situation in Palestine as a "conflict," when in reality it is a structural condition of domination and dispossession, which falls within the paradigm of settler colonialism.

I explained, in fact, that the Israeli occupation is not temporary, but part of a broader project that combines settler colonialism, apartheid, and military occupation. It is impossible to talk about development or "economic peace" without first ending the domination. Indeed, continuing to inject money and humanitarian aid is like trying to fix a broken toy: and in this, the international community has often failed, adopting inadequate paradigms that fail to address the root of the problem. Underlying everything is the Palestinian people's fundamental right to self-determination, a human right that has been continuously violated for decades.

It seems obvious to me, self-evident, that all this has nothing to do with anti-Semitism, but only with the desire to enforce the international laws that states have signed. These laws are such—and therefore have the power to define the boundaries of politics, distinguishing what is permitted from what is prohibited—only if they can be considered objective and universal, and therefore must be guaranteed to every person on Earth.

I was happy that day to be able to speak in a public and formal setting about the hope I see especially in the younger generations: certainly among Palestinians, but also in international civil society, and among many Jews in the diaspora, especially in the United States. I explained how, in my opinion, much of the debate on various social demands is articulated, or should be articulated, through the language of human rights, which shows us how politics often arrives late, or sometimes even resists change.

I cited the example of apartheid in South Africa, pointing out that it hadn't been dismantled because, suddenly, other states that had witnessed those atrocities had decided to act on their own merits and impose sanctions. On the contrary!
At first, many Western governments resisted the condemnation, until they were virtually forced to recognize that they could no longer oppose a global campaign of support for the anti-apartheid movement.

Ultimately, they had to give in to a reality they could no longer ignore. Yet that change hadn't come from above: it was the result of a transformation within South African society itself and twenty years of civil society mobilization around the world.

These words, spoken from that podium, supported by numerous interviews published in various newspapers, had a certain resonance. And because Alon Confino was who he was, no one dared attack him as ferociously as they did me. His reputation, his mettle, that day, were a stunning demonstration of how unity can truly be strength.

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After the meeting, we went for another stroll around Rome. The beautiful thing about Alon was that he was a great intellectual, with a powerful way of speaking that made you feel the strength of his ideas; yet at the same time, he knew how to be a simple man, refined and light-hearted.
After lunch with the journalists, the first thing he said to me was: "Come on, let's go to the Colosseum, so we can take a photo to send to Amos and make him die of envy!"

There was no break between the friendly chatter, the conversations that embraced his beloved companion Tal and her children, who lived in Israel, and the continuation of the conversations we had had a few hours earlier at Palazzo Giustiniani. I even remember that at a certain point, just as we were approaching the Colosseum, I was saying something to him like, "Don't you believe that European Jews went to Palestine because they had nowhere else to go, and not because there was a true connection to that land?" The narrative about the reason the Jewish state had established itself in Palestine seemed a bit flat to me: sure, compared to other countries like Argentina or Uganda, Palestine had a biblical appeal, but at that moment I couldn't see much else.

"So, for all intents and purposes, we can call it settler colonialism, right?" I continued. "Because the European Zionists wouldn't have gone to Palestine if they hadn't somehow exploited or artfully emphasized the religious element."

At that point he stopped in the middle of the street, burst out laughing and said to me: «Well, Francesca, if you were my student now

You'd risk failing the exam!' And then, in a more serious and gentle tone: 'That's not quite right. What you're saying isn't entirely accurate. But perhaps I can try to explain it better.'

And there, with the Colosseum as a backdrop, he spoke to me at length about the complex matrix of the claims to self-determination of European Jews, and beyond. We didn't even try to enter the Colosseum to see it from the inside, since there was too long a line and we were both engrossed in that conversation; so we remained there on a bench chatting. "There's much more to it for us. The Jewish people have a very strong bond with that land, and with Jerusalem in particular. It's our history. Obviously, the fact that we have this bond doesn't mean we own it. But we must always be able to present the complexity of the historical process, including the fact that there truly was no place where many of us could feel safe anymore. This is a very important point. After the Holocaust, it's not that we were protected, it's not that at a certain point everyone opened their eyes and said, 'Oh, poor Jews, let's help them.' No, they still didn't want us. No one wanted us in Europe. We were the plague victims; we had to somehow disappear from their sight. Because the Europeans couldn't even tolerate the idea that Jews were victims of everything that had happened."

Alon wasn't opposed to using the settler colonial paradigm to refer to Israel. "However," he told me that afternoon, "we need to fully understand the specifics of Jewish settler colonialism. Because, at its core, there has always been a very strong connection to those places, and it would be wrong to say that Jewish interest in Jerusalem and Palestine is artificial and merely an excuse. Love for that land is deeply rooted in our history and culture."

His words were incredibly important. From that conversation, I've always carried with me the thought that the State of Israel is what gave pride, legitimacy, and visibility to the Jewish people and European Jews, in a historical moment like the 1950s and 1960s when widespread anti-Semitism was still alive, making Jews feel protected for the first time in history. This understanding, for me, will always be linked to Alon and that afternoon on the streets of Rome.

And even more important and unforgettable was the smile with which he concluded the conversation, picking up his phone and coming over to me: "Come on, let's send the photo to Amos, and then, even if it's cold, I'd really like some ice cream, what do you say?" I don't remember if we actually went for ice cream. But afterward we definitely went to Trastevere, still walking and chatting, and then to eat artichokes with my friend Rania Hammad, daughter of the historic PLO representative in Italy, Nimer Hammad, and other friends. Parting in that jovial atmosphere was a nice way to say goodbye; and in any case, Alon and I had already made plans to see each other soon.

In March 2023, we were organizing Alon's participation in my presentation of the report in Geneva, when, in a video call where I vividly remember his green sweater and his imperceptibly troubled face, he said to me: «You know, I don't know if I can come?

I'm not feeling very well, I have to have some checks done."

After a couple of weeks, in April, he was diagnosed with leukemia, and his torment began. Meanwhile, I was preparing my second report on the deprivation of personal liberty in Palestine, and Alon and Amos were also very supportive, reading various versions and offering their comments, even while Alon was undergoing chemotherapy. After that, the correspondence became less frequent, and I tried to involve him less, because I realized he was getting very tired.

Then, suddenly, history goes crazy again. October 7th blew up in our faces with incredible violence. Just a couple of weeks later, I went to the United States to present my report on childhood, which went completely unnoticed despite being, as Amos said, "full of everything": the number of children killed, injured, and maimed by various wars and attacks, the catastrophic lack of healthcare that later deteriorated in an unspeakable way, but which was already unbearable for many before October 7th. For seventeen years, Gaza had been barred from leaving and almost nothing entered without Israel's consent, and this meant that otherwise perfectly treatable diseases, such as diabetes, could not be treated. There were children with non-serious conditions, but requiring special treatments unavailable in Gaza, who died inside their homes because they lacked the permission and the right to do so.

possibility of going out to see a specialist or receiving the necessary medications.

Yet none of this seemed to matter much to anyone. Indeed, for a long time, many in Europe continued to maintain that the October 7th attack was "the worst anti-Semitic attack since the Holocaust." Among them was French President Emmanuel Macron, to whom I responded publicly one day on social media: "The 'greatest anti-Semitic massacre of our century'? No, Mr. Macron. The victims of October 7th were not killed because of their Judaism, but in reaction to Israel's oppression. France and the international community did nothing to prevent it. My respects to the victims."

This cost me the severance of relations with French diplomacy, but even then I could rely on the important words Alon was writing in those months, which I drew upon as a gift. He and Amos, along with other scholars of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, had co-authored an article in the New York Review in November 2023 criticizing the instrumental use of historical memory to justify the aggression in Gaza. They denounced that insisting that "Hamas is the new Nazis," attributing collective responsibility to Palestinians, served to discredit those who defended their rights. They emphasized the importance of distinguishing between Hamas and the Palestinian population as a whole, and warned that "the confusion between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel" not only undermines the fight against genuine anti-Semitism, but also legitimizes the repression of dissent and the erasure of the Palestinian cause from public debate.

For me, the most terrible thing was that the attitude Macron was giving voice to completely exonerated Israel, nullifying the discussion on all the very serious violations of international law committed against the Palestinians for decades.

The very day I set foot in the United States, in October 2023, I called Alon and said, “I’m coming to visit you.”

He wasn't feeling well, and he replied: "Sorry, but I'm not in a condition to see anyone, my immune defenses are very low, I can't let you come to my house, I'm sorry."

But at the suggestion of Amos, his great friend and colleague, I allowed myself to insist and in the end we decided that I would go to visit him in Boston and, instead of meeting at his house, we would go somewhere.

We met at a restaurant, where I finally met his partner, the wonderful Tal. We'd found a completely empty place where we could meet while keeping our distance, and he never took off his mask. We spent a long time chatting, and after scrambling to take all those precautions, we ended the evening hugging.

He was very depressed, and not just because of his health. He said, "Israel is finished. Now I can truly see its end, but I no longer have the strength to do anything."

That was the last time I saw him.
Alon Confino died on June 27, 2024.

Ingrid

How do you overthrow apartheid?

The naked man took his arms off his head.

He had fallen and was looking. He looked at who was hitting him, blood was running down his face, and the bitch Gudrun felt the blood.

«Catch him! Bite him!» disse il capitano.

Gudrun bit the man, tearing from his shoulder.

"An die Gurgel," said the captain.

ELIO VITTORINI, ***Men and Not Men***

The first time I heard a detailed discussion of why it was necessary to call the situation in Palestine apartheid was in 2017, at a conference organized in Jordan by Arab academics and civil society. It seems obvious now, but until a few years ago, it wasn't at all.

Let's start from the assumption that various international law instruments exist to protect individuals, such as human rights treaties and, in situations of armed conflict, humanitarian law. These were adopted after the two world wars primarily to make conflicts less atrocious and to protect civilians as much as possible from the horrors of war. However, they also elevate individuals—and therefore not only, or no longer only, states—to the status of subjects of law in the international arena.

Human rights were not given to us as a gift: each of them is the fruit of the struggles and achievements of individuals like us. The slave trade was eliminated thanks in part to the abolitionist movement; apartheid and racial segregation were outlawed thanks to genuine civil battles, and thus we have made significant progress in the rights of workers, women, children, and people of diversity. The path to

Human rights is not linear, and the mission is not accomplished. The times we live in tell us this.

But let's go back to Palestine.

Until a few years ago, the primary—if not the only—legal framework for many in relation to the occupied Palestinian territory was humanitarian law, that is, the laws of war and military occupation. According to this framework, military occupation is acceptable only if temporary, tied to specific military needs, and carried out with full respect for the rights of the civilian population.

Israel, on the other hand, has occupied Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem since 1967 without time limit or valid justification. The UN itself called for its withdrawal, with a resolution passed a few months after the occupation began, recalling that it is never legitimate to acquire territory by force.

Yet Israel not only ignored that order, but instead expanded its presence in the occupied territory, including the Syrian Golan Heights, replacing local authorities with Israeli military personnel, imposing military laws, expropriating land, demolishing homes, and building over three hundred settlements, where approximately eight hundred thousand Israeli settlers now live. All this, despite the illegality of such actions being recognized under international law.

One of the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter states that the acquisition of territory by force is prohibited, and the International Court of Justice has repeatedly reiterated that an occupying power must guarantee the fundamental rights of the occupied population and cannot impede the right to self-determination.

In Palestine, however, this is exactly what happens.

To cover up its violations, Israel has used ambiguous language: it has spoken of "disputed" rather than occupied territory, of a "hostile" population rather than an occupied one, that is, one requiring protection. The international community, too, has often preferred to dwell on terms rather than decisively address the unacceptable reality of permanent occupation and its consequences.

Meanwhile, in the shadow of this debate over words rather than actions, Israel has continued to systematically undermine not only the territories, but also international law. Distorting the very meaning of

of law and justice. The illegality of this conduct is incurable, because it touches on one of the cornerstones of the international order: relations between states must be governed by the rules of law, not by the will of the strongest.

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2017 represented another powerful intellectual turning point for me, following the one that my attendance at SOAS had given me in 2005.

At the conference I attended in Jordan in May of that year, Michael Lynk – my predecessor as UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territory – had explained, drawing on the jurisprudence relating to South Africa's occupation of Rhodesia and Namibia (then called South West Africa), why, under international law, the Israeli occupation should be considered illegal.

In short, the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice had established that the South African presence in Southwest Africa was illegal precisely because: a) it did not serve military purposes and b) it violated the fundamental obligations of occupation. These obligations require that the occupation must safeguard the well-being of the occupied population and not subjugate it, alter its identity, or modify the status of the territory and the legal framework of the population. Furthermore, that occupation was not temporary: it had become a permanent condition.

As Michael Lynk stated that day in relation to the Namibian case, military occupation can never be considered a vehicle for colonization. ***Bingo!*** With those words, he had broken a barrier.

If the occupation is illegal, it must absolutely not be normalized: we must monitor every aspect and at all times and enforce its end.

At the time of that conference, I had been away from the United Nations for six years, but as I listened to it, thinking back to my time working in Palestine, everything suddenly became clear. During my years in Palestine, I had often asked myself these kinds of questions: why do we continue to use international humanitarian law, when it's clear that the military occupation is serving to take Palestinian land and destroy Palestinian lives?

The fact that the legal instrument had become inadequate to protect people was a notion that was somehow already present in me, but the words of my predecessor were important and, looking back, I said to myself: “Michael Lynk is right”.

After him, Ingrid Jaradat Gassner, a longtime Palestine expert, spoke. Continuing her analysis of the most appropriate legal framework for the Palestinian situation, Ingrid insisted on using the concept of apartheid. At the time, discussing apartheid in relation to Israel's conduct was unusual, especially outside of a certain activism. The significance of what Ingrid was saying was so revolutionary that many of us didn't fully grasp it: proof of this is the fact that, in the scholarly volume on the jurisprudence of Palestinian refugee legislation I was working on at the time, we only considered the apartheid regime marginally.

Although Ingrid was not a jurist, her contribution proved essential in successfully interpreting, from the most correct perspective, all the rules protecting individuals and groups.

Ingrid was Dutch, but had long lived in Palestine, in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. With her husband, Mohammed Jaradat, in 1998 she co-founded the BADIL research center, the leading organization in Palestine on the issue of Palestinian refugees since 1948. In 2005, she co-founded the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement, inspired by the global resistance against apartheid in South Africa and based on international law. The movement emerged shortly after a landmark 2004 advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice, which held that the construction of the wall, begun two years earlier, and Israel's practices in the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem were in serious violation of international law and fundamental Palestinian rights, such as freedom of movement, access to essential resources and services, and, above all, the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.

That wall, which cuts off the Palestinians from Jerusalem and which even today, after more than twenty years, no one has managed to tear down, enormously reduces their possibilities: how can the economy of a group of people be supported within a city like Jerusalem, surrounded on one side by the Israeli side and on the other three sides by colonies in the territory

What if these individuals provide services for a clientele that can't reach them, and if they can't buy Palestinian products because their ties with producers outside the city have been severed? The wall also prevents families from staying together and in touch, as well as Christians and Muslims from going to worship in Jerusalem. So it's truly an issue that affects so many aspects of a person's life.

The historic decision of the International Court of Justice was based on the right to self-determination: a right so important and central that, according to the law of international state responsibility, it must be upheld by all United Nations member states and entails the obligation for all of them not to recognize the illegitimate situation created by the occupation and to act to ensure respect for international law, including human rights. Therefore, UN countries would be obliged not to assist or support the occupation in any way, and also to demand a halt to the construction of the wall.

From a legal perspective, it was a landmark moment, because it was the first time a court had ruled on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Yet, from a practical standpoint, no one took action. Thus, in 2005, in response to the inaction of states following that pronouncement, BDS was created: a grassroots movement aimed at promoting boycotts, divestments, and sanctions against Israel, pushing it to comply with international law and universal human rights principles. A perfect example, in my view, of what civil society should be: the immune system of a healthy society respectful of universal rules, both nationally and internationally.

Ingrid was among the founders of this movement, inspired by the anti-apartheid advocacy efforts in South Africa, where a major campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions had taken place well before the states decided to act. Even today, we can't think of South Africa without the word "apartheid" springing to mind, but in that case, the bulk of the work had been done from the bottom up, and it all started with civil society, or rather, with a single person: a young worker, who had decided to implement practical measures within her reach.

It all began in Ireland in 1984, when Mary Manning, a twenty-one-year-old cashier, refused to check out grapefruit from South Africa at the supermarket where she worked, Dunnes, following her union's directive, which called on workers to boycott South African products as a gesture of protest against the policies of segregation and oppression.

When Manning and union representative Karen Gearon continued to refuse to handle any South African products, urging other workers to do the same, they were suspended and began a strike joined by eight other colleagues.

The strike lasted nearly three years, until April 1987, and set off a chain reaction that led to Ireland becoming the first Western country to impose a total ban on the import of South African goods, thanks to the public pressure generated by the courageous act of Mary and her colleagues.

The ban remained in effect until the end of the apartheid regime in 1994. When Nelson Mandela was awarded honorary citizenship of Dublin in 1990, Mandela himself acknowledged the significance of their gesture. He stated that, by doing so, the strikers had demonstrated to South Africans that ordinary people, far from where those events were unfolding, had played a pioneering role in the fight against apartheid. This thought, he said, also helped him resist in prison. But not only that. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 and invited the Dunnes protesters to attend the ceremony, the anti-apartheid movement born in Ireland was hit by a wave of support that fueled growing opposition to apartheid, creating a necessary and devastating step towards overthrowing that system.

To bring down oppressive regimes, you have to strike at their heart, their pockets: where they receive the proceeds of exploitation. This is the same philosophy underpinning the BDS movement, which is committed to publicly exposing international complicity—not only political, but also economic—with the apartheid regime imposed by the State of Israel against the Palestinians.

The discourse on apartheid, to which Ingrid had contributed decisively in the Palestinian case, has been taken up again in recent years and

also strengthened by several human rights associations.

The first to denounce it were two Israeli non-governmental organizations that document Israel's human rights violations in the occupied territory: Yesh Din and B'Tselem. In 2020, Yesh Din spoke of apartheid limited to the West Bank, where Israel applies two distinct legal systems: one for Israeli settlers, the other for Palestinians. In 2021, B'Tselem published a powerful report, accompanied by a landmark presentation to the UN Security Council by then-director Hagai El-Ad, in which he asserted that Israel imposed an apartheid regime on all Palestinians from the shore to the sea, that is, "from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean." According to B'Tselem, Israel effectively controls the entire area between the Jordan River and the sea, ensuring the supremacy of Israeli Jews at the expense of Palestinians. The identified apartheid policies included: Palestinian political and territorial fragmentation, unequal access to land and resources, restriction of movement, and a discriminatory legal system based on emergency laws, military orders, and regulations such as the 2018 law recognizing the right to self-determination “only for the Jewish people.”

In 2021, Human Rights Watch reinforced these analyses in a detailed report, defining Israeli apartheid as an institutionalized system of domination and oppression. HRW concluded that Israel was not only committing the crime of apartheid, but also that of persecution, that is, the systematic and intentional deprivation of a group's fundamental rights. "Israeli authorities systematically privilege Israeli Jews and repress Palestinians," with the stated goal of maintaining demographic, political, and territorial control.

In 2022, Amnesty International confirmed that Israel practices apartheid both in the occupied territory and within its borders, adding that the system also affects Palestinian refugees, who are excluded from the right of return, the principle according to which all Palestinian refugees have the right to return to the properties that they or their ancestors were forced to leave by Israelis in 1948 and 1967. In its report, Amnesty explicitly calls on “the Israeli authorities and other stakeholders to dismantle the system of apartheid against Palestinians and put an end to related human rights violations.”

So, is Israel an apartheid state or not? Of course it is: under international law, it is a system created to maintain the supremacy of one racial group over another through discriminatory and oppressive practices. Although historically, the South African regime immediately comes to mind, the International Convention on Apartheid classifies it as a crime against humanity that any state can commit, through inhumane acts—such as forced deportations, unlawful arrests, torture, and restrictions on freedom of movement—deployed to systematically oppress one racial group, keeping it under control for the benefit of another. The Rome Statute also lists apartheid among crimes against humanity, as acts committed "in the context of a widespread or systematic attack against any civilian population."

It is not just a question of discrimination, but of the denial of fundamental rights, the separation of people on racial and territorial grounds, and the use of coercive measures to keep the oppressed group at a disadvantage and isolated.

Thus, broadening the perspective beyond the case of South Africa, the characteristic of apartheid is the objective fact of an institutionalized segregation that has as its objective the domination of one group over another: something which, if we look closely, is also the backbone of colonialism, especially settler colonialism.

Who would dare say that France in Algeria or King Leopold's Belgium in the Congo weren't practicing apartheid? Apartheid can—and certainly does—exist in colonial contexts different and much broader than those we're accustomed to associating with the term.

Only a few years ago, even when I became UN Special Rapporteur in 2022, talking about apartheid in relation to Israel seemed impossible, so much so that in international diplomatic circles some would merely whisper ***"the A-word,"*** as if "apartheid" were a dirty word. Today, this awareness is already much more widespread, and I am certain that in a few years, the word "apartheid" will automatically be associated with the State of Israel, as it did in the past with South Africa, which still bears that stigma thirty years after its overthrow, through a long and painful process of reconciliation.

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In Israel's case, among the many violations must be counted the hundreds of thousands of lives lost, murdered, maimed in body and soul, and a destroyed Gaza. The genocide underway since 2023 cannot be erased from the history of the State of Israel, and I suspect that in the future the entire world will shudder when they see the Israeli flag, for what has been done in its name and under its aegis.

Today, we live this reality without fully realizing it, because human beings need time to reflect and observe from afar. However, we must not forget that the longer this time drags on, the more innocent people will die; this is why it is essential to continue explaining what we are facing and supporting the necessary reactionary movement to counter it.

Even simply informing oneself and promoting knowledge
represents an important contribution to the overthrow of apartheid.

Of course, in the case of South Africa, there were no pressures comparable to those currently supporting the State of Israel, which come from multiple and varied sources. This is not just a significant part of the Israeli administration, but also the vast network that has been built throughout the Western world and beyond, through hyperactive embassies and sophisticated communication techniques promoting the brand "Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East," "Israel, a startup nation." A new narrative that has replaced the slogans in vogue during Golda Meir's time: "A state that made the desert bloom" and "A people without a land for a land without a people."

Israel is currently supported by the political, cultural, and financial elites of various countries, first and foremost the United States, thanks also to the connivance of the military apparatus with the powerful American war industry (a very interesting book by Antony Loewenstein, ***Laboratorio Palestina,*** analyses these aspects in depth).

Another important component is represented by the now ubiquitous Christian Zionist groups, particularly active in the United States. Based on conservative interpretations of the Bible, they see the "return of the Jews to Palestine" as a fulfillment of prophecy, and consider support for Israel an integral part of their faith, thus significantly influencing US foreign policy.

Furthermore, Christian Zionism is also rapidly expanding in the Majority

global, or global South, where Christian proselytism carries with it, more and more ubiquitously, the Israeli flag.

To overcome such daunting obstacles, BDS has had to organize itself in a much more structured way than the South African anti-apartheid movement. Within BDS, Palestinians have created PACBI—Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, which promotes the boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions complicit or silent in the occupation, apartheid, and the denial of Palestinian rights—and a widespread transnational network of organizations and experts who support specific demands for boycott, sanctions, and divestment, weaving a web of peaceful, strategic, and active resistance to apartheid and its logic.

This is where the economic factor comes into play, which leads me to say: if Palestine were the scene of a crime, all of our fingerprints would be there.
Numerous companies, pension funds, banks, foundations, and organizations from various countries continue to invest in the Israeli economy, and this is naturally inextricably linked to the occupation. While the strong sectors of the Israeli economy, such as weapons and surveillance, are the most obvious, it is important to remember that any investment in the Israeli economy can have implications or connections with the occupation and exploitation of Palestinians and their resources, and thus effectively become an act of criminal conduct. Just like the grapefruits that Mary Manning refused to hand to Dunnes's cashier forty years ago.

Faced with a situation like this, which deserves to be denounced unequivocally and fought with all our strength, the call of the BDS movement—which is fully in line with international law—must be supported in every way possible: from what we buy to how we invest, from where we vacation to who we vote for, each of us should be called upon to make "apartheid-free" choices. Justice for Palestine begins with our own actions.

And this justice becomes more necessary every day, given the crimes Israel continues to commit. White South Africans never reached a level of violence such as to seek to annihilate the entire black population; their goal was segregation and domination. Today, in Israel/Palestine, the reality is completely different. The denunciation and the

overcoming apartheid, which could have been a great opportunity for change, have instead become a missed opportunity, especially after the catastrophic events following October 2023.

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At the end of March 2025, my friend and former colleague Lex Takkenberg, with whom I worked on a book on the history and legislation surrounding Palestinian refugees, wrote to me: "Ingrid is definitely needed these days. I miss talking to her, discussing, understanding."

Ingrid was a constant source of inspiration and positivity. During my travels to Bethlehem, while I taught at the local university, I met her several times, and even visited her in the beautiful stone house covered with climbing flowers where she lived with her husband, in a quiet area, far from the bustle of Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, the church built around the cave where Jesus was said to have been born.

The last time I saw her, in 2019, we had arranged to meet right there, mainly because getting to Ingrid's house, with my now lousy Arabic, would have been a nightmare for me and the hapless taxi driver.
The stone walls of the Grotto of the Nativity, lined with flickering candles, create an intimate, mystical atmosphere; and while I didn't feel any particular religious connection, standing before the silver star marking Jesus's supposed birthplace, I couldn't help but feel a profound respect for the sacredness of that place, and for the history and hopes of so many who venerate it.

It was a very brief meeting: Ingrid had other commitments to attend.
It's a shame, because I was going through a difficult time and felt the need for reassurance from someone I trusted and respected.
Lex and I had just finished our book and launched a consultation involving Palestinian civil society, Israeli scholars and activists, and international experts on the ***durable solutions*** for Palestinian refugees we proposed in the final chapter.

Under international law, we affirmed that Palestinians have the right to return, compensation and self-determination, but we further affirmed that anyone – from refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria or

Anyone from Jordan, Egypt, or other parts of the world where Palestinians live statelessly—who wish to move elsewhere and apply for citizenship—should be able to access ***resettlement*** opportunities .

This last proposal, however, aroused suspicion among many Palestinians, some even accusing me of promoting a "pro-Israeli" agenda and of wanting to threaten the right of return.

I knew Ingrid understood my intentions when I spoke of a politics of rights against the "politics of pain" of those who want to keep refugees in camps at all costs, waiting for the Palestinians to be honored with a right of return that, meanwhile, in the seventy-seven years that have passed since the Nakba, has not moved an inch closer.

But I kept those thoughts to myself that day, and after saying goodbye to Ingrid, I went to seek some silence in church. A church built in memory of a Palestinian born two thousand years ago, who must have been dark-skinned, because—with very rare exceptions—people of blond, light-skinned people had not yet arrived in those parts; a church where, during the second intifada, Palestinian resistance fighters had sought refuge to avoid siege and attack, obviously without success.

Every time I see the Basilica of the Nativity, I can't help but think of the birth and death of that boy and his crucifixion, which today I seem to see again in the destruction of his people, who tried to resist but are succumbing. If we practice seeing this people organically, as a body that resisted with all its strength, that sacrificed itself to defend its people, perhaps our perspective on Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation will also change.

Understanding the resistance does not, of course, mean justifying violence against Israeli civilians, but it does allow us to understand that this arises first and foremost in response to the destruction of a people that is now reaching its final phase.

In Palestine today, there is essentially no room for resistance. Some are fighting here and there, but they can't make it: they don't have the weapons to face the Middle East's most powerful army, backed by the world's strongest military power. Many no longer have the strength to fight back;

They can't get up if fighting means throwing punches. It's not a fair fight, and in unequal battles, those who lack the means defend themselves as best they can.

We are no longer in the era of the Italian partisans or of decolonization after the Second World War, when resistance was seen as heroic; today we have forgotten that Nelson Mandela was imprisoned to serve nearly thirty years precisely on terrorism charges, and that only in 2008 did the United States remove his name from the terrorist blacklist. We have forgotten that in the eyes of the Nazis, the Italian partisans were terrorists, and that within a mechanism between oppressor and oppressed, any person can be seen as a terrorist by some and a hero by others.

Unfortunately, resistance can sometimes also be violent, and it's usually more violent the more violent the oppression. Right now, Palestinians are desperate. If every people is like a body, the Palestinian body has been beaten with belts many times, for a very long time, and even more so today.

I was a child during the first intifada in 1987, but I'll never forget the images I saw on TV, squeezed on the couch between my brother and my mother, with police vans picking up kids throwing stones and blindfolding them. There was this boy in a green shirt, with a curly head and covered eyes. I remember the soldiers holding his arm and breaking his bones with stones. I remember Palestinians sitting on the ground, attacked by dogs... How many years have Palestinians suffered like this, and how much are they suffering now, now that cruelty is overflowing every conceivable barrier?

In this strange spring of 2025, it's hard for me to imagine the future. It's almost impossible for me to imagine Gaza rebuilt except as a great memorial to the genocide, but that doesn't mean I see the end of the Palestinian people: the Palestinians will rise again, but now the Israelis are tearing apart the bodies of this oppressed people, just as Roman politicians did to the body of that boy two thousand years ago. And we are called to ask ourselves if we want to be among those who wash their hands of it: among those who, to paraphrase Pessoa, will be condemned to suffer the wounds of battles they didn't fight.

Beyond my inveterate anticlericalism, I think that Jesus was a revolutionary of love, one who was not afraid to go to the Temple to

Making ***an*** incredible fuss, as we say in my part of the world. He knew he was carrying with him a higher, more humane, and redeeming truth than that proclaimed by the wise men of his time. The men of the Temple. He didn't just make a revolution; he ***was*** the revolution, with his whole being and in every act of his life, without normalizing a thing: that's what we must do too.

Either we commit to ***being*** the revolution or we will fail, because no change can happen in the world if it does not first happen within us.
We must strip ourselves, one preconception at a time, of all the baggage that each of us carries with us to move closer to the truth every day.

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Ingrid Jaradat Gassner was also a tireless and silent revolutionary. Her revolution was expressed in the way she used the international legal system like a Lego set, seeing all the pieces of the legal system at her disposal, dismantling them, and putting them back together to strengthen rights and ensure protection. By explaining how the apartheid framework applies to Palestine, Ingrid revealed to all of us what our eyes could not yet see. Here too, it is important to always consider the Palestinian people organically, as a single body. For this reason, we must not forget that even refugees outside their homeland are still victims of apartheid, which controls them with other means, for example, by preventing their return.

Refugees are an integral part of the Palestinian question: by helping to establish the BADIL research center, Ingrid has helped to do an immense work of mapping refugees, analyzing data, and making recommendations.

Finally, her latest project, "Defending Defenders," offered pro bono legal assistance to anyone who was the victim of attacks based on the exploitation of anti-Semitism—used by Israel as a shield against criticism, including many BDS activists who were criminalized simply for speaking the truth and calling for the application of international law. It was therefore a tool to protect and defend those who, in turn, defend the cause of the Palestinian people.

Ingrid passed away on November 16, 2023. I didn't even know she was ill.

I was deeply saddened that a woman like her—a true revolutionary, activist, intellectual, selfless, and intelligent fighter, capable of working behind the scenes, spreading her vision without any desire to be the center of attention—had passed away without me having had the chance to see her again. I would have loved to have been able to say goodbye and thank her for the lessons she taught me and all of us.

Some argue that knowledge isn't a process of acquisition but of progressive unveiling, of liberation from preconceptions. In my journey to understand the Palestinian question, you were certainly one of the figures to whom I am truly grateful for helping me open my eyes and see more clearly. I was once discussing this with Omar Barghouti, one of the co-founders of BDS. After expressing his respect for me, Omar told me bluntly: "Don't think you're exempt from a measure of ***racial bias!"***

“I know,” I replied. “And yes, I removed it. In fact, I’m removing it.”
little by little, as if peeling away the layers of an onion."

It is precisely for this reason that the cultural legacy that Ingrid Jaradat Gassner leaves us remains precious—indeed, crucial—for peeling away the layers of ignorance and preconceptions that we inevitably, unconsciously, carry within us and that weigh down our understanding of reality.

Among his most important lessons is a fundamental concept: when a people suffer oppression, they deserve total, unconditional, and principled support. We must know how to listen, we must truly look at who we are facing, have a "horizontal" vision of co-resistance, and avoid any form of paternalistic attitude toward others.

Palestinians are often spoken of as if they needed to be directed and disciplined, while in fact they simply need support. This is exactly what Ingrid has done, always tying the movement to law and a true philosophy, which as such must be rigorous and in some cases even rigid.

A striking example would be the case of ***No Other Land,*** a beautiful documentary that was seen by the BDS movement as a normalization effort, and therefore criticized. I didn't understand what the problem was. Many people, like me, must have thought, "Guys, do you really have to go and criticize a project like ***No Other Land?"***

But they countered: “Be careful, because this is the most insidious form of normalization.”

Now that I see the problem, I too recognize the danger. It's not lost on me that, when they received the Oscar, Yuval Abraham, whom I respect beyond belief, could have said: "I'm here to support my friend and brother Basel, with whom we are fighting against genocide, occupation, and apartheid, and I'll let him speak."

Instead, when he found himself on stage at the Oscars, he somehow leveled everything: "The atrocious destruction of Gaza and its people, which must end, the Israeli hostages brutally taken in the crime of October 7th, who must be freed..." Of course, what Yuval said is all true. The destruction of Gaza must end, and the hostages must return home. All hostages, though: Israeli and Palestinian. Thousands, including hundreds of children, languish in Israeli prisons, mistreated and often tortured beyond belief. It's as if Yuval, who I understand on a human level because his life in Israel has become hell, had taken that attention and brought it upon himself and the Israelis precisely at the moment when he should have stepped aside. But it took me time and explanations to understand the subtleties of normalization. Which is often unconscious, involuntary. But if you stand against the idea of supremacism, you must be able to completely put yourself aside: this is an essential step, and it is precisely for this reason—for having reconciled its practical activities, such as the most recent "in defense of the defenders," with those related to knowledge—that I consider the work of BDS and the contribution that Ingrid has made to it to be epochal.

Something that must continue to make us reflect and that we must never forget.

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The right words are very important as a prelude and preparation for the right actions. Therefore, in 2017, for me it was absolutely not an exercise in pure theoretical jurisprudence to understand how appropriate the definition of apartheid was to the ongoing situation in Palestine, and it is not an exercise today to recognize the need to adopt the word "genocide" to define it.

everything that had been preparing for some time and which was unleashed in a more sensational way since the end of 2023.

Seeing, understanding, and correctly framing the situations we witness are essential steps to preparing for action, especially when faced with those who are using words as powerful media weapons to support a massacre.

In my fourth report to the United Nations, which I titled "Anatomy of a Genocide," I denounced Israel's implementation of a veritable ***humanitarian camouflage:*** a pseudo-humanitarian camouflage for its systematic and pervasive violations of the law. In this way, Israel has subverted the foundations of international humanitarian law, giving the world the perception that it is legitimate to target civilians, viewing them as human shields or collateral damage.

When Israel uses Palestinians as human shields to enter homes, or takes prisoners from prisons to use during raids, that is literally ***human shielding:*** a well-defined concept explicitly prohibited by international law. And that's precisely the reversal.

Israel tends to talk about "evacuation orders" and "protected zones", but the language of international humanitarian law has been turned on its head, used in reverse to justify its military conduct and its war crimes, erasing the fundamental principles of discipline and protection in times of armed conflict: distinction between civilians and military personnel, military necessity, proportionality.

Upon closer inspection, isn't what Israel has always practiced in the occupied Palestinian territory merely ***humanitarian camouflage ,*** pulling the wool over the eyes of the international community, which has allowed it to do so? Why have all of us involved in various capacities in Palestine—humanitarian workers, diplomats, international officials, and experts in the field—been so concerned about denouncing the total and progressive oppression of Palestinians, obsessed with the idea of not offending Israel's sensibilities?

This attitude allowed Israeli political projects, which aimed to expand into what remained of historic Palestine well before 1967, to advance disguised as legality, hidden behind the facade of the laws of war, while sowing the seeds of behaviors that today appear in every way as the precursors of genocide.

The desire, especially among the West, to maintain a "neutral" narrative free of conflict has in fact perpetuated injustice and suffering, ignoring what Palestinians have always said and demanded.

When I lived in Palestine, I felt this profound incongruity within me, and one of the things that hurt me most was the perception that the United Nations, the development sector, and the humanitarian sector were also an integral part of that glass ceiling that prevented the Palestinians from moving forward.

The difference is always made in the facts. Because a correct understanding of a situation and the correct choice of words to describe it are undoubtedly essential to overthrowing apartheid and halting the genocide of the Palestinian people. However, as always, words alone are not enough and must be translated into action; otherwise, all speech will be futile and will not be able to change the atrocity of what is happening one iota.

Another thing that happened just a few days ago, as I write this, is that I attended a meeting with a high-ranking official from one of the European governments closest to Palestine: a meeting from which I left feeling so angry that I cried with frustration as soon as I hung up.

I found myself arguing with this government official, trying to understand what concrete actions the government he represents had taken to counter the injustice of the settlements and facilitate their dismantling. When I asked, "What are you doing about this?" he replied, almost angrily, "Come on, are you criticizing us now? We're not the worst in Europe."

I pointed out that their country invests more in the occupied territory than any other, but he shrugged. "What do you want us to do? Boycott Israel?"

When I insisted that they could at least avoid using their profits to worsen the situation, he told me bluntly that I was neither diplomatic nor constructive, and that I did not realize how much effort they were making to support the Palestinian Authority, with the aim of helping it oust Hamas from the Strip.

"But that's none of your business," I told him, in a calm voice and emphasizing each syllable. "It's not up to you to choose who should govern in

Palestine. You just have to make a useful contribution to ending the occupation, so that something remains of Palestine." This is what international law requires.

And yet, at least on one point, she was right: it's true that in certain things I'm not at all constructive. No, I'm not constructive when I talk to certain politicians who need to tell themselves their lies. I'm not good at bearing the wounds of unfought battles, to quote Pessoa again.
But at least I'm not destroying the lives of Palestinians, and I hope that one day I can end my own life thinking I did everything I could to save them. I am doing and will continue to do everything in my power, continuing to learn and peeling away the layers of my "onion" with the help of people who can teach me, as Ingrid did, who will always be a teacher to me.

These are the words engraved on his tomb, near Bethlehem: "We promise to smile whenever we can, as you did; to move forward at all costs, fighting, reflecting, defending hope despite the pain, falling, getting up, changing direction, resuming the fight, and finally achieving our liberation!"

And in the dream of the liberation of Palestine, today there is a little bit of the liberation of all of us.

Ghassan

How far can the cruelty of genocide go?

> The propaganda machine had already been activated in favor of the "fight against terrorism", supporting with great ease the need to do justice and defend human rights without paying much attention to the fact that war itself is legitimized terrorism, injustice absolute, irremediable violation of every right.
>
> GINO STRADA, on Emergency's intervention in Afghanistan in 2001

Some people think that in Palestine there are two sides to this so-called “conflict.”

Others, however, believe that this is not quite the case and, if this story could be represented on the stage of a Greek tragedy, the main subjects involved would be at least three: the Palestinians, the Israelis and Western imperialism, the latter supported by a chorus of vassalage and the oligarchic selfishness of various Arab governments.

"This 'war,'" argues Ghassan Abu Sitta, a British surgeon, "has demonstrated that the link between Western imperialism and Israel is an unbroken continuum. Israel is an integral part of the Western imperialist project in that area: a colony tied to the West, like all colonies in past centuries."

Ghassan Abu Sitta spent several weeks in Gaza after Israel launched its assault in the name of its right to avenge the people it held entirely responsible for the bloody assault of October 7. He supported Gaza's hospitals until he was physically able to operate. Then, with enormous difficulty, he returned.

«When I left Gaza [in November 2023, Ed.] and arrived in the UK, I realised that the genocidal project was like an iceberg.
Israel is only the visible tip, but the rest of the iceberg – which cannot be seen from Gaza

sees so clearly – it is the entire apparatus that makes genocide possible: the BBC, CNN, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the organizations that support it.»

Since Ghassan was elected rector in March 2024
of the University of Glasgow, everything happened around him.

To begin with, the pro-Israel group UK Lawyers for Israel filed a complaint against him, accusing him of being "unfit" to practice medicine because of alleged social media posts. This led to a request for suspension of his medical license from the General Medical Council, which was rejected by the Interim Orders Tribunal, citing a lack of concrete evidence and unreliable translations of the posts. The Tribunal upheld the defense's argument that these accusations were actually politically motivated, disguised as ethical concerns, intended to undermine his public credibility and limit his freedom of expression.

BBC journalists later told him that the broadcaster had placed him on a list of Palestinians who could no longer be interviewed, and that in the spring of 2024 he was barred from entering France, the Netherlands, and Germany, where he was scheduled to give lectures, having been banned by German authorities from the entire Schengen area, a move later ruled unlawful by the Potsdam administrative court.

"Meanwhile," Ghassan notes, "Germany is increasing its arms supplies tenfold, while the British Air Force is taking charge of electronic espionage by flying its planes over Gaza. And the Italian Air Force is supplying Israeli F-35s as they prepare to bomb Sana'a as well. All this shows that the Palestinian problem isn't a matter of misunderstanding. The problem is that Western powers are using Israel as a tool to protect their interests in the region. But these Western political elites will have to reckon with the fact that public opinion is changing. To observe this shift, one need only measure the level of oppression taking place in the West itself: in the United States, thousands of university students have been arrested. In the United Kingdom, even Holocaust survivors and organizers of anti-war demonstrations are being arrested. In Germany, police brutality against protesters has become systematic."

Upon his return to the UK, Ghassan decided to cooperate with Scotland Yard, providing testimony on the war crimes he accuses Israel of committing. Calling the current situation a wave of destruction unprecedented compared to the wars of recent years, the doctor stated that the attacks of the last year and a half constitute "a veritable tsunami of violence." For example, he reported seeing wounds clearly caused by the use of white phosphorus, wounds he was familiar with, having treated them during the 2009 Gaza war. "The use of white phosphorus is prohibited by international law. I recognized those burns immediately: I had already treated them in 2009."

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One evening in London, I found myself next to Ghassan during a conference at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and was able to hear, directly from him, the terrifying stories that have been keeping me awake at night for months.

During his stay at al-Shifa and al-Ahli hospitals, where he operated on victims of Israeli bombings, Ghassan performed up to twelve surgeries a day, many of them on children; including one tragic night when he had to perform six amputations on minors. According to his estimates, in the first months of the conflict in Gaza, approximately nine hundred children underwent amputations. "When you start operating on minors, you know that child will have to undergo at least ten or fifteen more operations between now and adulthood," he told us that evening. Who will do it?

Where will these operations be performed, if nothing remains of Gaza's healthcare system today? What will become of those children's futures, assuming they survive?

Israel's justification for bombing the hospitals is based on the alleged claim that al-Shifa was a Hamas operations center, which Ghassan categorically denied that evening. "In the hospitals, I saw only wounded and dead. Not a trace of Hamas." This is well known among operators and the media, and the Israeli army itself has been unable to provide a shred of evidence that doesn't appear fabricated. For example, a picture released

The video, which was released by the so-called Israel Defense Forces—which should more accurately be called the Israeli occupation forces—showed an Israeli officer pointing to a sheet of paper posted on the hospital wall, which had been presented as a Hamas operational plan; but it was later discovered that it was simply a schedule of hospital staff shifts.

This is also demonstrated by the images that Ghassan collected – and which the media deemed too graphic to be broadcast to the public – which show nothing but corridors crowded with people screaming in despair, mutilated limbs, charred bodies.

"When the Israelis besieged al-Shifa Hospital," he told us, "I was stuck in al-Ahli, which had become the only functioning hospital in Gaza, despite having already suffered extensive damage. In other hospitals in southern Gaza, I saw my colleagues sitting helpless because there was no power to operate the hospital and operating rooms.

At least al-Ahli still had two operating rooms and an X-ray machine, even though we could no longer use the CT scan. Besides me, there was an orthopedic surgeon and a couple of other general surgeons; but the air raids were so brutal, and the number of patients arriving was so great, that we were forced to operate nonstop for twenty-two hours. At that point, however, we finished everything. At five in the morning, the anesthesiologist came out of the operating room and announced: “Enough, there's nothing, there's no propofol, there's no oxygen, there's nothing I can sedate people with.” Even al-Ahli hospital had to shut down. We had no drugs to administer, and it was at that moment that I realized that the most serious problem wasn't the shortage of doctors; the problem was that the healthcare system was gradually being emptied of its resources, to the point that there were actually too many doctors for the situation. On that last night I was in the south, the wounded were being taken to al-Ahli in donkey carts because the ambulances had run out of gasoline. I also believe that over two hundred and fifty medical workers were arrested by Israeli forces during that period: some of them were tortured, and many people, probably hundreds, are still held in Israeli prisons. I myself probably avoided arrest only because at a certain point I moved from al-Shifa to the south, where I could still try to do something.

What has continued and continues to happen in Gaza since the fall of 2023 confirms Ghassan's words and fears. How can anyone refuse to accept the definition of genocide, given the horror that has engulfed Gaza? Who could believe the propaganda that attempts to frame such atrocious extermination as a "conflict"? Was it a "conflict" when the European colonists who created the United States wiped out hundreds of North America's native tribes with gunpowder and famine, massacring an entire people and impaling the heads of their most beloved tribal leaders in plain sight to sow terror among the people and discourage resistance?

Some time ago, in the Guardian, I read the testimony of Dr. Abu Ajwa, who, after being arrested by the Israelis, said his torturers explicitly asked him to break his hands so he could no longer operate. Then there was the story of Dr. Adnan al-Bursh, head of the orthopedic surgery department at al-Shifa Hospital and a close friend of Ghassan. He died at the age of fifty in April 2024, shortly after his arrest and transfer to Ofer prison in the occupied West Bank. Some colleagues and fellow prisoners stated that he died as a result of sexual violence, which led to a perforated intestine.

"The torture and killing of nearly a thousand health workers is a key component of the destruction of the healthcare system," Ghassan explained to us that evening in London. "Al-Shifa Hospital can be rebuilt in a couple of years, but it took twelve to train a doctor like Adnan al-Bursh. Considering the key specialties Gaza urgently needs, it's fair to say that of the five pathologists there before October 7th, only two are still alive. There are no longer any doctors qualified to perform emergency surgery in Gaza. All the nephrologists have been killed. A biostatistician analyzed systematic intentional killings and found that any health worker in Gaza is two and a half times more likely than anyone else to be targeted and killed by the Israelis. Even if there is a ceasefire and the Palestinians have a respite from the bombings, you can be sure that the genocide will continue," Ghassan continued in front of a room packed with people who listened to him in religious silence. "Because thanks to this strategy, people will continue to die anyway, even from conditions that could

"It's very good to be treated." Unfortunately, time has proven him right. And to date, more than a thousand healthcare workers have been killed between October 7, 2023, and January 2025, while over two hundred and fifty have been imprisoned.

"Genocide," Ghassan concluded, "is clearly recognized when destruction strikes everything: present, future, and past. Everything the people of Gaza have been is razed to the ground, erased."

That evening, next to Ghassan, I felt full and empty, noble and insignificant. The power of our words would not have saved any human life, at least not immediately. But the debate changes, day after day. Suffice it to say that our host that evening, the director of the Lancet, had described Gaza this way just after October 7th: "I walked through streets where images of 'martyrs', in combat fatigues and with machine guns crossed on their chests, accompanied children from the top of the walls on their way to school, or where men could be seen marching with their faces covered and assault rifles in hand, unstoppable. It is in this environment, created by Hamas, that new generations of children in Gaza are born. An environment that fuels and spreads terror." Reducing Gaza to an "environment that fuels and spreads terror" is unfair and superficial, and generalizations like these are misleading and dangerous.

That Hamas ruled Gaza with an iron fist is beyond doubt, and Palestinians were its first victims. But Hamas controlled Gaza for seventeen years, with Israel's blessing. As for the images on the walls, many don't know that for Palestinians, the celebration of "martyrs"—those who fell in battle, dressed in military fatigues—is not a glorification of violence per se, but rather a desire to honor those who lost their lives at the hands of the occupation and to remind the community of the need to support the families of the countless victims. But it's true that children are affected by the environment in which they grow up. And that's why, for years, Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations have implored the world to stop the occupation, annexation, and apartheid.

How much arrogance we Westerners display toward cultures and words whose meaning, roots, and essence we don't understand...

An arrogance that is widespread in all circles—from journalism to academia, and clearly in much of politics—which has contributed to making the humanity of the Palestinians invisible, further distancing their salvation.

This is why it's crucial to change the debate, spreading useful words to break down ignorance by spreading knowledge, and to continue asking the most important questions: what can we do to stop all this? How far will we go, while the world seems to be in a deep sleep and can't keep its eyes open to this wound that's as big as an entire nation, this wound that no one seems to care about healing or even soothing?

Eyal

How to calculate the conditions that lead to the destruction of a people?

> The genocide of one people leads to the genocide of another people: it is a confirmed axiom for centuries and generations of occupiers and occupied.
>
> For a totalitarian empire like the one that is being built before our eyes,
>
> Punitive expeditions are the norm, the essence. Today it's John Doe's turn to be executed, tomorrow it's John Doe's turn, the day after tomorrow it's little Liana's turn.
>
> ANNA POLITKOVSKAJA, ***For this***

In theory, well before delving into political and personal opinions, any rigorous discussion of what constitutes genocide should be grounded in what international law establishes on the matter.

Here, then, are the first five articles of the convention signed in New York by the United Nations on 9 December 1948, in the aftermath of the Holocaust which had led to the death of approximately six million European Jews, more than two hundred and fifty thousand Roma and Sinti, and three hundred thousand people with disabilities.

Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

The High Contracting Parties

whereas the United Nations General Assembly, in resolution 96 (I) of 11 December 1946, declared genocide to be a crime under international law
international, contrary to the spirit and purposes of the United Nations and condemned by the civilized world;

recognizing that genocide in all historical periods has inflicted grave losses on humanity;

convinced that international cooperation is necessary to free humanity from a such a hateful scourge;

agree as follows:

Article 1

The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and punish.

Article 2

In this Convention, genocide means any of the following acts:
committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

a. killing members of the group; b.
causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c.
deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to
cause its physical destruction, total or partial;
d. measures aimed at preventing births within the group; e.
forcibly transferring children from one group to another.

Article 3

The following acts will be punishable:

a. genocide; b.
conspiracy to commit genocide; c. direct and
public incitement to commit genocide; d. attempted genocide;
e. complicity in genocide.

Article 4

Persons committing genocide or any of the acts enumerated in Article 3 shall be punished, whether they are constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials, or private individuals.

Article 5

> The Contracting Parties undertake to issue, in accordance with their respective Constitutions, such laws as may be necessary to give effect to the provisions of this Convention, and in particular to provide for effective penal sanctions for persons guilty of genocide or of any of the other acts enumerated in Article 3.

This text and the awareness of humanity that underpins it should constitute the indispensable basis for everyone, including those who still have some doubts – or even believe they have arguments to object to – the idea that all the actions carried out by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people fully fall within the definition of the "crime of genocide."

The first time I heard of Eyal Weizman was in 2017, while I was co-authoring the book ***Palestinian Refugees in International Law with Lex Takkenberg.***

At the time, I was living with my family in Indonesia, but I spent long weeks in the Middle East, especially in Jordan and Palestine, conducting archival research and speaking with people who could help me piece together all the evidence I was gathering to reconstruct, from a legal perspective, nearly eighty years of forced exodus of Palestinians from their homeland. Although it was a purely legal and technical book, I was very keen not to lose the historical aspect of what happened to the Palestinian people. It was essential for me to make clear to readers of that text how politics had determined certain legal consequences: for example, in some cases, the ***failure*** to apply the law.

In this quest for greater understanding and useful tools for myself and for those who would one day read that text, I spent many afternoons in the office of Dr. Anis Kassim, a great lawyer and man of culture who for many years, in addition to being the author of very important legal analyses concerning the Palestinian question, was the editor of a scholarly publication on international law, the ***Palestine Yearbook of International Law.***

The ritual of our sessions was to greet all the lawyers present in the office and take a seat in the various armchairs around the table, while Anis Kassim moved a mountain of volumes from his desk crammed with books and files, made room, brought biscuits and tea, and then began to speak.

I've always loved his calm, elegant voice, which guided me through historical recesses in which he himself had been a protagonist, such as the years of the peace process. It was in one of these conversations that he asked me, "Have you read ***Hollow Land*** by Eyal Weizman?"

I noticed that some of those present frowned upon hearing that name, but knowing Professor Kassim well enough by now, I was sure that he would never exclude an author from his readings just because he was Israeli.
After all, it was he who, a few years earlier, had recommended that I read a series of books by the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, with whom I would later develop a relationship of friendship and deep esteem.

That afternoon, "Dr. Anis"—as we all call him, out of respect—talked to me at length about ***Hollow Land*** —translated into Italian as ***Spaziocidio. Israele e l'architettura come strumento di controllo (Spacecide: Israel and Architecture as a Tool of Control) ,*** which I read –, shortly thereafter and which I also find a powerful and necessary book for understanding what happened in Palestine, starting with the fact that the systematic, human, and political destruction of a people begins first with the creation of a land of emptiness.

As the founder and director of the research group Forensic Architecture, Eyal Weizman is committed to revealing the miserable conditions imposed by the Israeli occupation through spatial analysis.
From his perspective as a forensic architect – that is, a professional who primarily uses architectural tools and digital technologies to reconstruct past events related to crimes, disasters, or human rights violations – in this book Eyal retraces the history of the Israeli occupation of Palestine in the forty years between 1967 and 2007.

This highly technical perspective on events that I thought I knew quite well from a legal and historical perspective led me to discover new elements of a specifically geographical nature, yet interpreted through the experience of a people and thus through the unfolding of history in people's daily lives. All this helped me illuminate from within my understanding of the violence in Palestine through the fragmentation of law, which paradoxically follows—rather than resolves—the fragmentation of geography.

In ***Hollow Land*** it is clear that Israel has used architecture and geography as tools of power to consolidate its control over the occupied Palestinian territory. Urban space and landscape have been

Modified to favor military and political domination, and this is reflected in many aspects. From the way Israeli settlements in the West Bank were strategically designed, so that colonization would create a territorial fragmentation capable of hindering the continuity of the territory, to the management of infrastructure and mobility. How is it possible that the entire system of roads, checkpoints, and separation walls, which have restricted Palestinian freedom of movement in every way for decades, continues to guarantee safe and rapid access to Israeli settlers, under the watchful and "neutral" gaze of the international community? And what is the purpose of all this?

A concept that was truly crucial for me in reading ***Hollow Land*** is that of "vertical politics": a fully three-dimensional use of space, which unequivocally demonstrates how the Israeli occupation is not limited only to horizontal borders, but also extends to the control of airspace, the subsoil – for example, through tunnels and aqueducts – and the height of buildings.

Thanks to his studies, his many interests, and what I would later discover to be a multifaceted personality, Eyal Weizman reveals many things, but the book's essence is how Israel has managed to trap the Palestinians politically, also by exploiting a geographical chaos paradoxically "structured" to their disadvantage. According to him, virtually anyone can be complicit in this system (willingly or unwillingly), unless they rigorously distance themselves from it:

> The spatial organization of the occupied territories is the result not only of an orderly process of planning and implementation but also, and increasingly, of a «chaos structured», in which the selective – and often deliberate – absence of state intervention favors a deregulated process of violent expropriation. The actors operating within this border area – the young settlers, the Israeli army, the cell phone companies and other large capitalist corporations, human rights and political activists, armed resistance, legal and humanitarian experts, Israeli government ministers, foreign governments, "support" communities abroad, state planners, the media, the Israeli High Court of Justice – all, albeit with different and contradictory objectives, have a role in the widespread and anarchic, if collective, creation and modification of these spaces.

One of the ideas I found most brilliant in his text is the call to open our eyes to the risk of the "humanitarian paradox," that is, the possibility that humanitarian interventions could unwittingly support military occupation rather than counter it. Eyal Weizman believes that intervening to correct the consequences of certain decisions made by the occupying forces could somehow absolve Israel of its responsibilities, including legal ones, allowing it to divert resources to other objectives and, at the same time, make the occupation more "efficient" and tolerable in the eyes of public opinion. Starting from this premise, we arrive at the concept that anyone who finds themselves operating, in any capacity, in such a dire situation must respect their own integrity, even well beyond the confines of their profession in a given context. For example, as Rony Brauman of Médecins Sans Frontières has said, it is crucial that humanitarian organizations—which sometimes gain access to environments and information that others, including journalists, cannot—use this privileged position to bear witness and denounce the injustices they observe, while maintaining independence and impartiality in their actions.

According to Brauman, any healthcare worker "goes into the field with medical tools and comes back with a testimony": their task, therefore, is not only to treat those who are ill, but also "to bear witness to the truth of the injustices committed and to claim political responsibility."

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Eyal and I first met in person in London, where I was attending a conference. After publishing my report on self-determination for the United Nations, I contacted him because of the strong affinity I found between our ways of looking at the materiality and immateriality of settler-colonialism underway in Palestine: his from a spatial perspective, mine from a legal one. We met at his home on a cold morning, in the company of some of his most trusted collaborators. One of the statements that struck me most during that conversation concerned his relationship with Israel. "I will return only when I can have a Palestinian passport," he told me, astounding me. From that meeting, a relationship was born.

a solid collaboration that gradually transformed into a precious friendship that continues to strengthen over time.

In February 2025, Eyal and I found ourselves side by side, in Berlin.
During my visit, we were supposed to discuss the grave consequences of Israeli military operations and the policies that have devastated life in Gaza. However, two of our presentations were cancelled or sabotaged due to political pressure on universities and organizations, casting a truly worrying light on the decline of academic freedom in Germany.

However, amid growing intimidation of anyone who insists on keeping the debate open, Eyal and I agreed to commit ourselves to be a beacon of hope, alongside Germans who refuse to bow to oppression and the many Jews and Palestinians in Germany who are facing repression unprecedented in Europe. Despite adversity and a climate of fear, our conferences were held thanks to the determination of all involved, albeit in makeshift venues and with a heavy police presence.

Starting from the method and perspective of architecture, he presented a concept that deeply touched me: the fact that for Palestinians, for generations now, home is "something you leave behind, not the place you stay."
Much like what I often say about genocide through settler colonialism or ethnic cleansing: for Indigenous peoples, land is ***who*** you are, not where you live.

Settler colonialism, Eyal explained, is a process that operates through a dual dynamic: construction and destruction. On the one hand, settlements, infrastructure, and colonies are built; on the other, the conditions that make life possible for the colonized population are systematically destroyed.

The conference we were supposed to hold together the next day at the University of Berlin—but which the German authorities canceled, forcing us to move it at the last minute to a venue with infinitely smaller capacity—had precisely this title: ***Conditions of Life Calculated to Destroy.*** Referring to Article 2(c) of the Genocide Convention, which prohibits inflicting on a human group "conditions of life calculated ***to*** bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part," Eyal added that day: "We could say that in

"Calculating the living conditions of others is a concept implicit in settler colonialism."

And this type of colonialism, according to his analysis, works in two opposing ways: on the one hand, it improves conditions in the occupied territory to encourage the arrival of new settlers and increase the demographic weight of the Israelis; on the other, it destroys the conditions of the Palestinian population in a thousand ways.

"The Gaza Strip," Eyal said, "is nothing more than the result of an engineering effort aimed at destroying living conditions within it. It is a long experiment in which living conditions are degraded to the point of pushing the population to leave." And he wasn't just referring to the siege of the last twenty years or the catastrophe we've been witnessing since October 2023, but more generally to the spatial and political configuration of the Strip since its creation in 1948. Gaza, he argued, has been shaped as a space where life is being made increasingly unsustainable based on a system that American scholar Sara Roy has defined as ***de-development:*** progressive cuts to water and electricity, destruction of infrastructure, after decades of creating the conditions to decimate and pollute the subsoil, render the aquifer unsustainable, impoverish economic conditions, and undermine hospitals and scientific research. All this, within a ghetto: because since 1948, Gaza, despite significant legal developments, has always been a ghetto, as Eyal reminded us. Over time, population growth and its unwillingness to be coerced into voluntary migration—which Israel, including through the United Nations, has tried in vain to promote for decades—have led Israelis to consider drastic measures to reduce the demographic threat Gaza poses to them. While the West Bank is less densely populated and there are still many ways to care for—or avoid caring for—its local population, Gaza is one of the most densely populated places in the world. Or, rather, it was.

"Over the past twenty years, living conditions in Gaza have been so meticulously calculated that they even regulated calories," Eyal says, explaining that Israel decided how much and what food to allow in, establishing the quantities based on the minimum necessary for age and gender standards. Throughout this time, Palestinians have also received

water and electricity supplies "according to a level defined as 'humanitarian minimum'".

The striking thing to observe is how, in the meantime, the Israeli state has instead improved living conditions in the territories adjacent to Gaza, to entice Israelis to settle there, providing subsidies, infrastructure, and water transfers from the north to the south of historic Palestine.

“It was not easy to convince new settlers to come and live near Gaza,” observed Eyal – who calls a “settler” anyone not originally from that land who went to live in historic Palestine (now Israel) – demonstrating that to this end it was essential to “calculate the living conditions” in the opposite direction.

All forms of oppression against Palestinians—ethnic cleansing, permanent occupation, apartheid, genocide—are in reality aspects of the same colonial system. And on this, Eyal added an unforgettable quote: "When certain mechanisms for calculating the living conditions of a people are already in place, the moment you decide to exterminate that people, you simply strengthen them and take them to their extreme consequences."

Other Israeli historians, such as Ilan Pappé, who explored the concept of ethnic cleansing in the context of the Nakba, and Raz Segal, who described the current reality in Gaza as a paradigmatic example of "explicit genocide, plain for all to see, without any shame," reached the same conclusion before the organization led by Eyal drew up ***a true "cartography of genocide"*** in Gaza (the interactive platform A Cartography of Genocide was launched in 2024).

Genocide, according to Eyal, does not start from scratch, nor does it consist of a sudden escalation, but is grafted onto pre-existing structures and mechanisms. This is true in the case of Israeli actions in Palestine, as well as in other situations and contexts Eyal has encountered in his work as an analyst and scholar. Such is the genocide committed in Guatemala by government forces in the early 1980s against the indigenous Mayan populations, accused of supporting left-wing rebels, or that against the Nama and Herero in Namibia, when between 1904 and 1908 German colonial forces responded to the uprising against colonial oppression with a veritable campaign of extermination through deportation, concentration camps, starvation, and disease.

In both cases, Eyal says he found the same pattern, based on the destruction of the land and living conditions as a means of extermination. "Violence is inflicted not only directly on human beings, but also on the environments that sustain them: hospitals, schools, communities, places of worship."

The genocide Eyal speaks of is a sort of archetypal model of the elimination of the other. It is the massacre of a body through all possible means, including spatial destruction.

If bullets are enough to kill a body, much more is needed to kill a people: every means available must be activated, so that that collective body is emptied, annihilated, even if it continues to move.

I imagine it as a series of continuous electric shocks: blows that, by repeatedly striking, extinguish a life in its very essence. Just look at the conditions of Native Americans, or of many of the very few Aboriginal peoples in Australia who still resist. While in neighboring Aotearoa, New Zealand, the Mÿori have been occupied and colonized, but their life as a people, though restricted and not entirely protected, has not been suffocated or completely destroyed, this is the reality for many other indigenous peoples. And this is what risks happening to the Palestinians in their own land, just as it happened to the Jews of Europe a century ago.

After years of discrimination and persecution, came the racial laws, expulsion from civil life, extreme ghettoization, hunger, and disease.
And then – as the numbers of European Jews continued to be high, at the command of –, unscrupulous criminals, and in the almost total silence of contemporaries, the Final Solution was reached.
It was that unprecedented horror on European soil, that mechanized extermination on an industrial scale, that led the world to say "never again" and to define genocide as a crime.

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Today in Palestine the genocide that was ordered in the aftermath of the attack launched by Hamas on 7 October 2023 clearly appears as a systematic action with the intent of destroying a people through a series of military operations that indiscriminately hit civilians,

Causing death and devastation everywhere. Israeli forces, armed with a lethal arsenal, have razed entire cities, destroying homes, schools, hospitals, and the very networks that sustain daily life. The wounds inflicted on the Palestinian population are evident, with tens of thousands dead, including over seventeen thousand children, and hundreds of thousands wounded: a million children (this is the demographics of Gaza) battered in body and soul, silenced by an indiscriminate violence that spares nothing.

Since October 2023, life in Gaza has become a succession of bombings and massacres, a context in which access to basic resources, such as water and medicine, has been deliberately obstructed, pushing the population toward hunger and desperation. The words used to demonize Palestinians—"human animals," "there are no innocent civilians," "not even children are innocent"—accompany a policy of violence and impunity that echoes a ignoble past that we Europeans, more than anyone else, should not have forgotten.

I'll say it bluntly: denying the gravity of these actions means turning a blind eye to an ongoing genocide. A crime that would have required the urgent mobilization of the international community, which unfortunately hasn't happened yet, because today, as yesterday, before stopping a genocide, you have to see it.

Genocide is recognized by its victims: a people targeted as such. For decades, Palestinians have been treated as an inconvenient and unwelcome presence, even in the little land they had left—Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem—where they should have been able to build the state they have long yearned for and which the international community claims to support. Instead, Israel has continued to reign with an iron fist and drive Palestinians from their homes, claiming over that land the sole "sovereignty of the Jewish people": a concept that, if you think about it, was already absurd a hundred years ago, given that that land was never inhabited only by Jews, but was a welcoming melting pot of diverse cultures, religions, and peoples, of which Jews constituted a minority. And it appears even more absurd in light of the current international legal framework, which tolerates no discrimination of any kind, including that of religion or "race," that horrendous word that has done so much harm to humanity over the past five hundred years.

The ongoing tragedy in Palestine was, sadly, the chronicle of a genocide that had been foretold. Genocide scholars had long been aware of the warning signs: summary killings, arbitrary arrests, and racial segregation against Palestinians.

Conditions specifically calculated to lead a people to destruction.

But all this has been systematically ignored, if not normalized, over time. The expansion of Israeli settlements—occurring under the pretext of endless and inconclusive negotiations—has revealed the illusory nature of a peace without rights. But all this is overlooked because, in the meantime, the story of Palestine being told is quite different.

Italy is a striking example of how public opinion has been progressively manipulated by politicians—increasingly aligned with successive Israeli center-right governments (including the so-called Italian "left," with many Democratic Party members actively involved in defending Israeli interests)—and, as a direct consequence of political influence, by the media.

After September 11, 2001, with the advent of the global war on terrorism, the resistance of those defending what remains of their land has been reduced to implacable judgment. Thus, Palestinians have been labeled terrorists ante litteram, without judgment or appeal, and as such, it seems they must be eliminated. The idea that, finding themselves in a situation of subjugation and disadvantage, Palestinians have the right to defend themselves from oppression and to see their right to self-determination realized seems to have disappeared from Italian public debate.

So our partisans, including President Pertini, Nuto Revelli, Carla Capponi, and many others we honor as founders of our country's freedom, were also terrorists?

We all know that since October 7, 2023, more than seventeen thousand children have been murdered, a thousand of them under one year of age, yet this narrative about the Palestinians continues unabated. Seventeen thousand children welcomed around the world with disinterest by a complicit press and a policy subservient to Israeli interests. This is the reality of the Palestinians in 2025: a reality that demands to be examined and challenged.

There are many of us fighting against this genocide and against the silence that accompanies it: in this fight it is essential to acquire knowledge and a

right vision.

That afternoon, Eyal concluded his remarks by telling us that, even if the ceasefire that had been so much talked about in those days actually came about, the destruction of the Palestinian people would not be over, and that it will not end as long as "the same logic that led to this destruction continues to prevail." Regarding some proposals put forward for the future of Gaza, such as the one—which he called "delusional"—of relocating the entire population, Eyal reminded us of the importance of examining any reconstruction project with the utmost care, given that "many seem more like a continuation of the destruction, disguised as humanitarian aid." I understand this argument perfectly. For years, I have been denouncing how humanitarian aid has often been used to mask and obscure the profound immorality of Israel's plan for conquest, a plan that no Western member of the United Nations has the courage to oppose. Indeed, many—such as Germany, the United Kingdom led by Starmer, and Italy under the Meloni government—actively support it.

On a warm winter morning in Berlin, in the second year of the genocide of the Palestinian people, before a crowd of demoralized students and riot police, Eyal concluded his speech with a final warning: "In this case, reconstruction would not be a remedy for the destruction, but rather its continuation: it would be used to complete what the genocide failed to accomplish."

I share Eyal's dismay at President Trump's proposal to rebuild Gaza as a Mediterranean coast, after "cleansing" it of its inhabitants. This is utter, illegal, and immoral nonsense, which, upon closer inspection, falls squarely within the realm of ethnic cleansing, or rather, incitement to forced displacement. This is a crime recognized by international law, which, with the latest statements from the US administration, officially enters US foreign policy for the first time. Forced displacement and further expropriations, in the context of this genocide, would strengthen other countries' complicity in the crimes Israel has already committed over the decades and exponentially worsened in recent years.

months, further worsening the crisis that is threatening to destroy the Palestinian people.

But the very fact that, as Eyal Weizman and I discussed these issues, the backdrop to our conversation was punctuated by police vans, officers guarding students in riot gear, and threats of arrest against me, reveals how the entire system we live in has already been seriously compromised.

And it calls us to be ready to offer our contribution, our testimony, and, to the extent we can, our active commitment to ensure that the horrors of the past and present no longer frame our daily lives.

Malak

Where is the home of a refugee person?

> When I travel I always carry too many things with me [...]. Analyzing this fact I am I came to the conclusion that I had a secret but ineradicable fear of never returning.
>
> EDWARD W. SAID, ***Always in the Wrong Place***

What the Palestinians call the "Nakba", meaning "catastrophe", is the forced exodus in which, between the end of the British Mandate and the first years following the birth of the State of Israel (1948-1949), seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians were forced to leave their homes following violence, massacres and the systematic destruction of their villages.

During this period, vast swathes of land were seized or abandoned by Palestinians, who initially fled as news spread of the violence committed by the Jewish militias Irgun, Haganah, and Lehi, which had merged with the Israeli army after 1948, and were then expelled at gunpoint, on foot, or in vans organized by Israeli militias.

Thus, in a short time, approximately five hundred Palestinian villages and towns were destroyed or depopulated. Historians speak of several dozen massacres—including summary executions, rapes, and other crimes against the elderly, men, women, and children, such as the infamous ones at Tantura and Deir Yassin—which accelerated the depopulation of historic Palestine. The destroyed villages were not simply abandoned: many were deliberately demolished, and the lands were often reused to build new Jewish communities or for other purposes within the new State of Israel.

Salman Abu Sitta, founder and president of the Palestine Land Society (PLS) – based in London, dedicated to documenting the Palestinian land and people –, and many other historians and scholars of the Nakba have attested how the lands abandoned by the Palestinians were subsequently

occupied and used by the new State of Israel. Abu Sitta, in particular, has conducted extensive research aimed at mapping pre-1948 Palestinian locations and analyzing the possibilities of return for refugees, arguing that the right of return is not only just, but absolutely feasible.

For the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were confined to the Gaza Strip since 1948, the Jews who occupied their lands were nothing more than settlers: settlers who, from the earliest days of the State of Israel, defended the lands stolen from their rightful owners with gunfire and by using kibbutzim as defensive outposts, which many abroad saw simply as the jewel in the crown of the newborn Jewish state's great socialist model.

This painful and unresolved history has been passed down among Palestinians from generation to generation, and it is worth remembering that the dispossession of the Palestinians had already begun well before 1948, during the thirty-year period of British colonization (1920-1948). The British almost continuously facilitated waves of immigration that brought many Jews from Europe to settle in Palestine, intent on escaping persecution and building a new life in the land "of their ancestors." But that land was already inhabited, and the idea of expelling its population was clear from the outset to the Zionist leadership of the time.

How could this history be left untaught, or simply expected to be forgotten? Imagine the cruelty of asking Armenians not to speak of the violence they suffered and the massive theft of their lives, land, and culture during the genocide committed by the Ottomans, and the same goes for the indigenous peoples of Australia, America, and so many other genocidal sites throughout history.

Yet, when I worked in Palestine as a lawyer for UNRWA and in the years that followed, I often had the feeling that American administrations expected the agency to truly ***appease*** the Palestinians.

Whatever abuses were committed against their grandparents, their lands, their lives, since 1948, the Palestinian people should have loved Israel, and certainly not contested it.

One of my tasks when I arrived in Palestine in 2010 was to conduct an audit of the agency's human rights program, curricula, and curriculum used in UNRWA schools.

This audit was on behalf of UNRWA's American donor, which has always been the agency's largest contributor, and I prepared the necessary documents for the three auditors from the United States to conduct their investigation. They examined UNRWA's school materials to ensure they contained nothing that could "incite terrorism, anti-Semitism, and violence." Of course, nothing ever came to light that could indicate "anti-Israel, including anti-Semitic, messages," but for years now these programs have been under constant attack, accused by the Israeli government and its allies of containing anti-Semitic messages.

Although UNRWA, under a memorandum of understanding signed with Israel in 1967, has always cared for approximately five million Palestinian refugees in the occupied territory, relieving Israel – as the occupying power – of this burden, things have changed since the peace process launched with the Madrid Conference in 1991.

Until then, the refugee issue had almost ceased to be talked about. But, within the context of the peace process, Palestinians and others began to reflect on what peace and the two-state solution would mean for refugees. The copious output of estimates, historical reconstructions, legal analyses, statistical and economic calculations became a thorn in the side of Israel, which considered the refugee issue closed, dead and buried. "It happened a long

time ago, who cares anymore!" a well-known Israeli jurist casually told me during a workshop in 2017.

Israel doesn't see the Palestinians, doesn't listen to them, and, even more seriously, doesn't "feel" them. For most Israelis who speak out publicly, but also for many members of the Jewish diaspora, there is only one perspective: Israel's. How Israel experiences history, how it feels pain, what context it operates within.

Many intellectuals, while claiming to be moderate and opposed to the occupation, focus only on condemning Hamas's violence, while remaining silent about the shocking number of Palestinian victims and the destruction caused by the Israeli army after October 7, 2023. They repeat unverified accusations, such as mass rape, but avoid acknowledging the brutality suffered by the Palestinian population.

The language changes when they talk about the Palestinians.

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But let's go back to 2010: to prepare my audit, I had the opportunity to visit the entire area commonly known as the "Gaza Strip" for the first time, and to return several times in the following months. During one of those visits, an exhibition of children's paintings had been set up in the atrium of a school, and I remember some of them deeply affecting me: they weren't on paper, like almost all the others, but on canvas, and they demonstrated a mastery and beauty I hadn't expected to find in that context.

“Who painted these paintings?” I asked the teachers.

«A sixth grade girl, she's very good, isn't she?»

"I'd love to have one of her paintings: this one," I said, pointing to an image I still have before my eyes, with two figures of little girls with round faces and eyes as blue as the sky behind them, a large, pot-bellied dove flying above them. "I'd also like to meet her, is that possible?"

So, that afternoon fifteen years ago, I met Malak Mattar, who was then an eleven-year-old girl with a chubby face framed by two braids of thick black hair. I remember her as beautiful and very shy; she didn't speak English, but, through her teachers, she sweetly told me she couldn't sell me the painting I loved so much: first of all, because it belonged to the school. Second, because she wouldn't have been able to quote me a price. She should have asked if she could accept money, but her uncle, a famous painter from Gaza who had taught her to paint, wasn't there.

Years later, I was searching online for an image to use for a conference poster when I came across a painting of white doves flying around large-eyed, soft-faced human figures, and I had an epiphany. "Is this work Palestinian?" I asked.

Someone confirmed to me: “Yes, he is Palestinian.”

"Actually, he must be from Gaza. Right?"

"Yes, the painter is from Gaza. Her name is Malak Mattar."

I had no doubts: it could only be her, that little girl I met briefly many years ago in one of the UNRWA schools.

I wrote to her immediately, and at that point I had decided: we absolutely had to have one of her works on the poster for our event, and so we did. It was a conference organized to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the death of Edward Said, a great Palestinian intellectual and author, who had been an academic at Columbia University. The conference was held in London on October 3, 2023, just days before the event that would forever change the lives of Palestinians and Israelis, and certainly all the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, including Malak and his family.

Since then we have always remained in contact.

However, several years would pass between our first meeting and the next, which took place not in Gaza, but in London, only at the end of 2024, during the wonderful conference at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, where I spoke alongside Ghassan Abu Sitta. That evening, in the crowd, I immediately recognized Malak, and finally, after the conference, we were able to hug.

She told me that she had left Gaza exactly the day before October 7th and had then moved to London, where she had been accepted into a Masters in Fine Arts at St Martins School, one of the world's leading visual arts schools. Her family, however, consisting of her parents and two brothers, had remained in Gaza and were desperately trying to find refuge in Egypt. It would take months for them to finally leave Gaza, having miraculously survived the bombings and in extremely difficult conditions.

"At first," he explained, "part of my family decided to stay in the north. They thought, 'This land is ours, and we'll save it; we must protect it from any colonization ambitions, so we'll stay here. Let them kill us if they want, but we're not leaving.'" This is also because for many people, including my family, the decision to leave or stay has always brought with it a strong trauma from the past: after the Nakba of '48, those who left their lands could never return.

Then, one morning, something happened that convinced them to flee the Rimal neighborhood, where they lived: the secondary school where their mother taught was bombed a few minutes after she left, while she was still in the car on her way home. So they moved, finding

refuge in the northern Gaza Strip: first in a neighborhood called al-Karama, then near al-Shifa Hospital. And throughout all this, the family had to be separated: the men on one side, the women and children on the other.
A crazy situation. A few days later they decided to head south.
Warnings were becoming more frequent, a sea of people were leaving their homes, and there was ever-increasing pressure for people from the north to move south.

My family went to Deir al-Balah and lived at my aunt's house for five months. It was a nightmare for me: I had just arrived in London, and with all this moving around, I could never get in touch with them. I had no news, I didn't know how they were, I didn't even know if they were alive or dead. I kept trying to call them, but there was no signal and the only answer was a jingle. From the excitement of my new course at St Martins, which would allow me to grow as an artist, I spiraled into the anguish of not knowing if the people closest to me were safe.

That evening, after the London event, Malak and I managed to exchange only a few words, and his story ended many months later: right around this time in March 2025, when I'm finishing the book, I found myself back in London, managed to organize a more intimate dinner, and finally Malak was able to tell me the second part of this complicated and painful story. "And anyway, much less than many others," he specified immediately after we sat down at the table, before even choosing what to eat. "In my friend Ahmed's family, for example, everyone has died in the last few months. He has no one left."

Malak's family, however, managed to escape. "After trying every way possible, we realized there was no other way than to raise enough money to bribe the Egyptians—a lot of money. Five thousand dollars for each person, twenty thousand in total, since there are four of my family: my parents, my brother, and my sister. Luckily, they managed to recover their savings and leave Palestine for Egypt. Finally, on the day of the evacuation, I went to Egypt and was able to see them again. They were traumatized, shocked, and even physically injured: when the building in front of theirs was bombed, the windows exploded on top of my sister. But she herself told me…

That the most terrifying moments were the journey from Deir al-Balah to the border, strewn with the bodies of people killed and left there, along the road. They prayed the whole way, but when they finally arrived in Egypt, they felt crushed by a kind of guilt for having survived. My mother was shocked; she kept telling me: “How could I have left so many people behind? Especially those who hosted me. And my friends, my relatives, my things...” She still can't get over it.

Then another battle began—in this case, a legal one—because the British government had denied Malak's family a visa to join her, and they had to file a lawsuit to have the decision overturned. "We attended countless hearings, and the lawyers kept telling me, 'Malak, you're fighting a battle you'll probably lose.' But I said to myself, 'Well, at least we're fighting it.'"

Their appeal, Malak says, was based on demonstrating how important it was for her to have her family by her side. Supporting the request were the testimonies of various experts: psychologists, sociologists, and other professionals. The main obstacle was the idea that her loved ones could pose "a threat to her safety," and at every hearing, some opposing lawyer would refer to them as if they were dangerous people.

It was necessary to demonstrate that they all loved art, theatre... as if, implicitly, those who lacked culture did not deserve to receive this opportunity.

After endless months, they won. In the first weeks of 2025, visas were issued, technically on the basis of family reunification, and very soon, her parents will be able to join Malak in London. At that point in her story, she picked up her fork and, with a sigh, began to eat.

Both my parents grew up in Gaza as refugees, after my mother's and father's families were forcibly displaced from their villages in 1948. My father is from Al-Jura, while my mother is from Al-Batani al-Sharqi, of which almost nothing remains. But even though I've never been able to visit these places, I feel like I know them well because my grandparents always spoke of them.

A lot. Ever since I was little, I've developed a strong sense of belonging to the countries where my roots lie; and naturally, my relationship with Gaza is quite complex."

The villages Malak told me about were erased from the map of history with the creation of the State of Israel; but in fact, the land, the remains of the houses, and the graves of the ancestors of the Palestinian families displaced in 1948 are still there, in Israel.

“So it doesn’t feel like home to you?” I asked her.

"Well," she replied with a very eloquent smile. "Indeed, yes. I'm a refugee, that's not where my family history unfolded, but it's where I grew up and it's where I began to learn the language of art thanks to my uncle, Mohammed Musallam, who is an internationally renowned artist and who also worked extensively as an art teacher in Gaza.

So, to answer your question, I could tell you that Gaza isn't my home, but today I would choose it as my home. Even more so now, perhaps, when the neighborhood where I grew up has been practically razed to the ground and lives only in our memories. My fondest memories are in Gaza, and despite everything, for me it's a place where you can dream. When I was fifteen, I was invited to have an exhibition in Bristol, UK. Of course, I was overjoyed. I went to my father and asked him, "Dad! Can I go? Will they let me? These people say they'll pay for everything; they just want me to go there and talk a little about my painting." But he replied, "Do you think Israel will let you go abroad for an exhibition when they won't even let cancer patients go, who are stuck here dying without medicine?" His words hurt me deeply, but that didn't stop me from continuing to paint, dream, and have ambitions in life. And I felt the same thing in all my friends. Each of us had the drive to achieve something."

This is a characteristic that has always struck me about Palestinians.
Even under military dictatorship and a veritable siege—what Gaza has been subjected to since 2007, under the military blockade (and not only, military), under occupation, in truly difficult living conditions—they have managed to preserve that drive, that love for life that shines through in every word and breath that Malak told me about, and that I have seen, as she herself says, in so many people. They have never let themselves be crushed.

and this makes a huge difference: because, when you commit yourself with all your strength to living a just and dignified life, no one can interfere or decide for you.

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After graduating high school with flying colors and winning a scholarship to perfect her craft in Turkey, Malak spent a full year obtaining the necessary permits to leave. From there, she could have continued her studies in France or the United Kingdom, but both countries refused her visas.

She told me that, in her first year outside Palestine, she was denied entry into almost every country. The idea of freedom she had cultivated for so long had shattered against reality. She thought that, once she left Gaza, she would finally be free, with wings to fly wherever she wanted. But that wasn't the case. During her time in Turkey, she learned that simply physically leaving Gaza isn't enough if the entire world continues to view Palestinians as a threat.

"Anyway," he said, raising his head, his eyes brightening, "it took a lot of trying, but now I live here and I'm traveling so much that there's only one blank page left on my passport. That, too, is resistance for me!" he concluded, laughing. "It's stupid, right?"

"It doesn't seem like much to me," I told her. I was smiling too, but I wanted to cry thinking about Malak's adventures and then the stamps on my children's passports.

"For me, it's important to be able to say to the settlers: 'You know what? I'm going out into the world to make my art known!' This is the spirit with which I grew up as a woman and as an artist in Gaza. Imagine, at my first solo exhibition, I exhibited a large painting on corruption, on the dynamics of power, and an old professor came to me and said, 'Your painting is interesting, but you're a young woman. Wouldn't it be better to paint flowers, vases, something nice, and leave politics to the men?'"

Perhaps it was precisely this kind of comments that, instead of discouraging me, encouraged me to disappoint other people's expectations and to do everything I could to ensure that our voices could resonate and be heard.

listen: indeed, these episodes were fundamental stages in my artistic journey."

The truly difficult challenges, Malak told me, were quite different: the art shop where he went to buy paint was bombed and no longer exists; the gallery where he dreamed of exhibiting his works was destroyed; many of the friends who frequented his home to talk and paint together were killed. This is the reality of those who make art in Gaza: living and creating under occupation.

With burning eyes, she told me that when she was fourteen or fifteen, she had received a commission from the United States, from Tennessee: a painting of a Christmas tree. But when it was time to mail it, the post office asked her, "Is this a political work?" Any artist living in Gaza always faced a form of censorship regarding what they could or could not paint, which symbols they could or could not include in their work. If a work was considered political, the military would confiscate it. So, if she included a keffiyeh in a painting, would it be seen as a political symbol? Would they take it away?

At that point I asked her how difficult it had been to become an artist under the occupation.

"Very much," she replied seriously. "It was incredibly difficult. Do you know why they hate us and want to destroy every aspect of art? Because art is hope. That's why they killed Refaat Alareer, whose poetry gave hope to so many. The most shocking reality the occupation faces is that we speak with the language of art, which is the most powerful language against all forms of dehumanization: being able to reach other people with a poem or a painting is the best way to sweep away all stereotypes. That's why I truly believe art is dangerous," she concluded with a smile.

After we finished eating, we went for a walk and crossed one of the many small gardens that dot central London.

I looked at Malak's lunar face, very sweet but with a look marked and hardened by violence, by submission, while she told me that even there in London many things are very difficult for her: for example, now she is looking for a house that can accommodate the whole family when her parents will be able to reach her, but the rents are too expensive and, with her bag

It's truly complex, as a study. Theirs is a wonderful scenario, because they're all alive, especially when compared to the constant anguish Malak felt before her family managed to reach Egypt, when she knew they had no food, were under bombardment, and faced death at every moment. Yet, she told me that every time they managed to speak on the phone, her father would only ask, "So, what are you painting these days?"

Malak didn't understand at first: "But what does it matter, Dad?"

Then he explained it to her: "You're there for a reason, Malak. You have to paint our life, our struggle, everything we're going through. You're an artist, so you're our voice."

She told me she will never forget those words. Hearing a genocide survivor ask her to give voice, through painting, to what his people were experiencing was an enormous responsibility for her, and also an honor. It was from there that the idea for a monumental work took shape: a painting measuring almost five meters by two in which she attempted to convey everything she couldn't say with words. They nicknamed it "the ***Guernica*** of Gaza," although its real title is ***No Words.*** It is a work born from the heart of the ongoing genocide, and is entirely in black and white, because, as she explained in an interview, "only black can reflect reality, a horrible reality that silences us." Malak no longer sees the colors of her homeland.

On the walls, graffiti screams in Arabic and English: "Gaza will live forever" and "Gaza will haunt you." The canvas shows animals feeding on the corpses left to rot. In the center, a distraught man rides a donkey, his mouth agape with pain, shock, and shame.

Around him, bodies and rubble: women, men, children. The composition is dense with stark details, a violence that saturates the space. The houses, the schools, the mosques, the cultural centers: everything is destroyed. No one speaks anymore, in that work.

Malak painted silence. He painted the disappearance of journalists, artists, poets, and intellectuals. A work that freezes the blood in your veins, Malak painted it. in.

But his art is pure expression, without filters, both when he sees the world in black and white, and when he uses colours in his unique way: as in the painting that illustrates the cover of this same book that you have in your hands,

which is part of a cycle of works from which we also took inspiration for the title ***When the World Sleeps.***

As we hugged each other goodbye, Malak told me with a sad but poignant smile: "Apparently, people are interested in seeing Gaza's pain painted. But there's not enough paint to tell it all."

Gabor

Why is it so important to preserve the memory of a people?

Neytiri: "Sky People cannot learn, you do not see."
Jake: "Then teach me how to see!"

Avatar

A month before the liberation of Budapest, while we were walking down the street, my mother entrusted me to a complete stranger because she no longer felt confident she could guarantee my survival. Jews were once again being deported and killed by the Hungarian Nazis. She had no idea when our turn might come, so that day she placed me in the arms of a stranger she met on the street.

This is a key memory in the story of Gabor Maté, a Canadian physician and psychotherapist of Hungarian descent. Today, Gabor works with trauma and healing, leveraging his own pain to offer others something important: he gives people hope by saying extremely sensible, valuable things, always with great simplicity. During an event where we discussed the situation in Palestine, I heard him argue bluntly, but in a voice as quiet as a caress: "You have to be truly ignorant not to know, not to understand, not to see colonialism in Palestine, or to deny that Palestinians are the oppressed and Israelis are the oppressors." There's something wrong, Gabor continues, with those who fail to see how Judaism, his religion, is being exploited in the name of an ethnonationalism based on the premise of a discriminatory ideology.

And this, for me, makes him a person who is no longer just a therapist of the individual, but of the community. I believe this is also why

a lot of people listen to it.

Trauma, according to Gabor Maté, is not so much what happens externally to an individual, but rather what happens internally in response to a painful event. This creates an intimate wound that will inevitably manifest itself externally sooner or later, potentially permanently limiting a person's emotional, psychological, and relational capacities. However, if we can develop awareness and compassion, we can begin a healing process.

The ***disconnection*** from self and others, which Maté describes as an inevitable consequence of any trauma, affects not only the individual.
A person may feel isolated, distrustful, and disconnected, and eventually somatize the suffering in their bodies. But the same feeling can emerge from historical traumas and generate shared experiences that affect families, entire communities, or peoples, shattering collective bonds and identities.

Indeed, as he emphasizes, the transmission of trauma—especially when it occurs through a lack of emotional regulation—can also be interpreted from an intergenerational or collective perspective. If adults in a society carry with them painful experiences that have left deep scars, their trauma has the power to be culturally passed down to new generations. The invisible scars of ancestors can influence the way young people perceive themselves and the world, perpetuating a cycle of suffering and disconnection that requires conscious, and I would add, compassionate, work to break.

Trauma, according to Gabor Maté, "changes the perception of the world."

When entire groups internalize a vision of life influenced by their trauma and fear, this fuels a constant sense of threat and mistrust and impacts their collective view of the outside world. It's not hard to imagine how important these dynamics are for populations who have experienced oppression, war, persecution, exile, and extermination. And this is the eternal point of contact between Jews and Palestinians.

The idea that trauma is central to the collective experience of Jews and Palestinians alike is a theme explored by scholars dear to me, such as Amos Goldberg and Bashir Bashir. In their edited book, ***Holocaust and Nakba.***
Narratives between history and trauma, Goldberg and Bashir highlight how these

These events—with their accompanying collective pain, loss, and bewilderment, beyond their dramatic differences—have shaped the identities and memories of both peoples. Thus, in the passage from one generation to the next, they have become central elements of their history, shaping not only past experiences but also current relationships and struggles for dignity and justice. The act of preserving memory is crucial, precisely because—as Gabor Maté often emphasizes and explains in one of his most moving books, ***The Myth of Normality*** —trauma is not simply what happened, on a personal and collective level, but above all, precisely what happens and continues to happen ***within*** people in response to that experience. And this is especially true when it touches on something deeply painful: for example, the genocide of the Jews during the Holocaust, and the genocide of the Palestinian people that began in Gaza and is unfolding before the world's eyes.

According to Gabor Maté, all authentic healing requires the courage to face the pain we carry within, given that the typical, deeply held beliefs of those who have suffered trauma, such as the classic "There's something wrong with me," are not just negative thoughts, but something that lives on in our neurophysiology, creating veritable sets of interconnected mental processes. When we try to avoid the memory of pain—by denying it, or unconsciously hiding it under feelings of guilt, self-sabotage, or self-loathing—we actually prevent the healing process from taking place. Cultivating emotional memory, on the other hand, is therefore an act of restoring truth to ourselves, or to an entire population that has been hurt and outraged: only by acknowledging the wound can we begin to heal it.

As an Israeli colleague once reminded me, Jews, not just those living in Israel, have had many opportunities to confront and heal their collective trauma, the result of centuries of persecution culminating in one of the most horrendous genocides in history. This opportunity has materialized in moments of collective compassion and grief expressed through Holocaust Remembrance Days, museums, and memorials around the world. In schools—or at least in schools in Europe, where the Holocaust was committed—the history of the genocide of the Jews is taught with seriousness and respect, offering new generations the opportunity to reflect on and confront that painful past.

Of course, it's interesting to note how little is spoken about the genocide of the Roma and Sinti—the Porrajmos, which in Romani means "great devouring," or Samudaripen, "killing of all," which also occurred during World War II, primarily at the hands of the Nazi regime. The extermination affected hundreds of thousands of people belonging to these communities, who in many parts of Europe still suffer discrimination today.

And even Palestinians are still denied this opportunity. They have never been able to close the circle of their past, to process the collective grief over the loss of the land, homes, and community life they enjoyed until 1948. Not only have they lacked recognition of their rights and legitimate demands for justice for all they endured in the past; their suffering is often rendered invisible and misunderstood, neither by Israel nor by the entire Western political ecosystem, which ultimately makes decisions, even in the face of the injustices they endure today.

The genocide currently underway in Gaza is proof of this.

In the prevailing Western debate, it seems impossible to discuss the violence Palestinians experience daily without first considering Israel and its right to self-defense, even when this right is asserted on the very little land Palestinians have left to establish a state, and therefore illegitimately. Of course, like any member state of the United Nations, Israel has the right to invoke the right to self-defense enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter when the conditions are met: that is, when it is attacked by another state or when authorized by the UN Security Council. Without these conditions, the use of force to wage war is illegitimate. And the use of force, in the case of Gaza and the rest of occupied Palestine, is illegitimate: as an occupying power, the Court of Justice reminds us, Israel cannot militarily attack the population it militarily occupies. Pure logic expressed in law. (But, by the way, does the right to self-defense also apply to Palestinians, yes or no?)

Furthermore, it seems that one cannot talk about the current situation in Palestine without starting from the horror of October 7, 2023, almost as if the decades of unspeakable violence committed by Israel against Palestinians before that date – as well as the pain suffered by Israeli civilians in other countries – were

occasions, for example during the wave of suicide attacks of the second intifada –, counted for nothing.

This selective reading of history leaves entire generations in a state of trauma that is not only unresolved, but ongoing. A trauma that renews itself every day, in the denial of the value of their suffering and in the continuation—indeed, the intensification—of the very violence that that suffering continues to cause.

The near-total lack of understanding for Palestinian rights often renders them invisible, in life and in death; forced into an inevitable subordination to the logic and demands of Israel, a state that, day after day, swallows up more and more of another people's land. And yet, despite this, relentlessly manages to stir up discussion of its own sacrosanct right to exist. It, and it alone. Wherever it wishes, however it wishes, by whatever means it deems appropriate.

The contemporary world has demonstrated this a thousand times: colonialism not only imposes its dominion over a people, destroying any possible future, but also completes its work by wiping out their memory. Destroying or minimizing the memory and pain of a genocide, or other atrocities, means adding another brick to prevent any possible healing for those touched by that trauma.

I find it almost cathartic that someone like Gabor, who, as a Jew, has himself experienced the effects of a historical and personal trauma that has left emotional scars on him for life, speaks so clearly and forcefully about these issues. Gabor now lives in Canada, part of a "colonial society" on a land that was inhabited by other peoples before Europeans arrived, imposing their political power and forcing the indigenous peoples to culturally assimilate to their language and customs.

Not only have indigenous peoples been denied the right to self-determination during centuries of colonization, but they continue to be prevented from preserving their collective and cultural memory. Genocide, in the broadest sense, also consists of this.

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The last time I went to Canada, in late October 2024, I already knew Gabor Maté by reputation, but we hadn't met yet. At that time, my body was clearly somatizing and manifesting many fatigues and worries. On the other side of the world, at the time, my mother, who had been ill for years, was going through a difficult time. The burden of the dual guilt—not being by her side and leaving the rest of my family to cope without me—was intertwined with my husband's sudden health problem. I was emotionally and physically exhausted, and as often happens in times of overload, I developed excruciating back pain, accompanied by migraines and nausea. I remember spending the entire car ride from Ottawa to Toronto trying to meditate, to restore oxygen and calm to my back through mental exercise, but I had very little energy left. It was under these conditions that, the following day, I went to meet a delegation of academics from the Centre for Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto.

In Europe or Italy, few seem to know that Canada was the scene of a massive genocide of the original indigenous populations.

From the mid-19th century until the 1990s, Canadian governments implemented systematic policies and practices to sterilize indigenous populations or forcibly assimilate them into the dominant culture. Assimilation occurred primarily through the residential school system, designed to separate children from their families, forcing them to adopt European language and values. Adoption by non-indigenous families served to sever their ties to their roots, whether Inuit, Métis, or First Nations. Many of these children suffered mistreatment, physical and sexual abuse, and many died as a result of inhumane living conditions. Recent investigations and research have uncovered mass graves and testimonies that highlight the horror of these genocidal policies. This process had a devastating impact on indigenous communities, leading to the loss of languages, cultures, and identities, and left deep scars that continue to affect them today. In Canada today, the genocide is recognized but, although there is an ongoing reconciliation process, true justice for the indigenous people of this part

Turtle Island (the name by which many indigenous ethnic groups, including the Iroquois and Anishinaabe, refer to North America) is still a long way off. Since I'm working on Palestine, I felt it was imperative for me to meet with representatives of indigenous communities in North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

So at the University of Toronto that day, there were twenty people gathered around a table besides me and my colleague. For a few moments, there was a certain awkwardness: I wasn't part of that group and I was unsure how to start the conversation and what protocol to follow. How do I greet someone? Who should break the ice? However, the state of indecision was short-lived, because the connection that immediately followed, the shared energy, and mutual openness transformed that meeting into an unforgettable experience of community and compassion.

These scholars welcomed me into the conversation by reciting their welcome in indigenous languages: an invocation with words of gratitude addressed first and foremost to nature, acknowledging the elements: water, earth, fire, air. It is a way of being in the world that outlines a non-anthropocentric horizon, where humanity is a thread in the vast fabric of existence, not its fulcrum. A way of being in the world that restores forgotten proportions, brings us back to an ancient wisdom with its magical symbolism: a revelation that, at this moment in history, has the power to whisper long-dormant truths to us.

A way of being in the world that invites us to see.

Opening the meeting, one of the ***indigenous scholars,*** who is also a musician, began to sing. An ancestral, powerful chant that grew ever more intense, the kind that shakes you to the core. And there, in that university classroom, it almost seemed as if the windows were shaking. It was so loud, so charged with meaning, that at a certain point I almost felt afraid; but it was a sacred fear, because we were no longer simply in a room: his voice had transported us to another space, another time.

Even then, listening to the singing, I was distracted from my pain. It was as if, for a moment, beyond me, with my suffering body, there was something else, something greater, flowing through me. Like a river. Then they began passing around tobacco, each taking a little and letting it rest in the palm of their hand. Shortly afterward, they explained to me that this helps absorb the pain. It had come to

They were missing a leader, and that gesture helped them focus, to enter a space of deep connection before speaking to others. They clutched that little ball of dried leaves in their hands, charged it with intention, and only then did they begin to tell me their stories. Hard, poignant stories.
Many descended from mixed families: if not themselves, one or both of their parents had been taken from their homes and placed in schools or foster homes run by white Canadians. Children taken from their Indigenous parents to break the lineage, to destroy cultural transmission, to erase their identity.

Yet, one by one, those people—like the indigenous communities to which they belong—are reclaiming the space to live out their identities. This process of liberation, aimed at a reaffirmation of identity, both cultural and political, wasn't born today, but now it seems to be pulsating with renewed vigor. And this has made me reflect broadly on what is happening to all of us.

For some time now, I've been sensing a growing sense of renewal everywhere, as if the seeds of a revolution were sprouting, preparing to rise up against political dissatisfaction. Just as in a sick body, when antibodies are activated to ensure that healthy cells come to the aid of struggling cells to fight disease, the seeds of resistance, which reacts and mobilizes in the face of injustice, in some countries, especially Western ones, are the antibodies of a healthy society. This drive also exists among various peoples of the Earth, and the solidarity of indigenous peoples and various nations around the world with Palestine confirms this.

Unfortunately, the crust that needs to be scratched is thick. Ancient.

That day, the scholars told me that the university building we were in sits on a river that is sacred to them. "This concrete is suffocating it," they said. "They destroyed the trees, they took them away from us, but we still hear their voices." They spoke with acute awareness; it was as if the land were speaking through them.

Among the academics sitting around that table, there were some who particularly struck me. A woman in her thirties told us she had been adopted by a Zionist Jewish family: this caused her a double torment, a laceration of identity that is not easily healed. Another indigenous woman, petite but with an imposing presence, was sitting next to me; she told us she had been a ***hidden***

Child, a little girl who had been hidden to prevent her from being taken away from her family of origin: she spoke her people's language perfectly, a language that others must rediscover in order to make their own. Like her, everyone in that room shared a strong connection to the land, as well as a deep, raw wound: a trauma they carry within them that cannot heal without committing to preserving its memory.

Sometimes it seems to me that in many Western countries, it's difficult for many people to truly understand what settler colonialism is and what it entails. Most textbooks studied by Italian and Western children in general, for example, speak in completely neutral—if not even heroic—terms of the violent colonialism upon which the Greek and Roman civilizations were founded on our country's soil, wiping out entire populations and erasing the memory of their cultures, their indigenous languages, and all their knowledge. These are steps that are taken for granted, and are deemed unnecessary to draw attention to. And the same is true for more recent colonialism, which began with the caravels led by the Genoese Christopher Columbus: an event, often romanticized as the "discovery of America," which instead marked the beginning of an era of colonization and exploitation that led to the deaths of tens of millions of indigenous peoples across the Americas. These historical steps are often overlooked, but they had devastating and lasting consequences.

So I sometimes wonder how we can understand what happens when a people is destroyed and a collective body is dismembered and abandoned without recognition, without care, causing internal wounds, traumas that become embodied and that will reverberate in the pain of many generations to come, as Gabor explains. At the same time, new awarenesses are blossoming today, accompanied by concrete commitment. As in Canada, in many other countries, studies of indigenous cultures and movements that cultivate memory are emerging or gaining strength, to mend and heal these deep wounds.

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Just a few weeks before leaving for Canada, I held a public event in Washington, D.C., at one of the independent bookstores Busboys and Poets: spaces that have always hosted rebellious voices, African-American literature, and resistance texts, and which constitute true counterpoints to the world of lobbyists that populate the streets of the United States capital. During the years I lived in Washington, after leaving Palestine, Busboys and Poets was one of my refuges. I frequented the place often, both for meetings, discussions, and book signings, and for a reading and a coffee on rainy or snowy days with Leila, who, as an infant, traveled everywhere with me in the stroller.

That evening, at Busboys and Poets on Fourteenth and V Streets NW, Hope was also present. She is a member of the Piscataway people, one of the many indigenous peoples exterminated by Western settlers in the process of forming what is now the United States. Hope introduced the evening by introducing herself as Firestarter, "she who lights the fire," and brought us her people's offerings and a greeting in the Lenape language, which she then translated for us. The Piscataway dialect has been lost, but the Lenape language shares common roots with it. This poem is by Nora Thompson Dean—her Lenape name was Weènchipahkihëlèxkwe, "woman who touches the leaves"—who was among the last fluent speakers of the Southern Unami dialect and who dedicated her life to documenting, teaching, and transmitting the spiritual and cultural traditions of her people, collaborating with scholars and institutions to preserve them for future generations.

Kuxëna Kishelëmienk,

wanìshi tili nàski nipain yushe tali, I'm not sure what to do with my life. I'm not sure what to do with my life. I'm not sure what to do with my life

yu ènta kishux pèchi òxekamakuna yushe xkwithakamika.

Milinèn weltëk tëmakàn tìlìch kàski ikalìchi pèchi pètawsinèn yushe ènta

xthank you.

The most important thing is to be able to do it.

Wanìshi Nuxati, wetënëmai winëweokàn.

Us in lekèch.

Our Father who created us,

Thank you for allowing me to stay here in this place, and for all the good things you have done for me.
donated, thank you for the water and for the sun that shines on us on this earth.

Give us a good path, so that we can continue to live longer here on
this land.
Forgive us when we do wrong and when we say wrong.
Thank you, dear Father, and accept this prayer from me.
Amen

It was deeply moving to be welcomed like this, and I also found it instructive for the hundreds of people who had come to listen to the debate. This is precisely what we must do: seize every opportunity to learn to see better, to understand, to preserve and honor the memory of what has disappeared, fighting alongside those who resist, to help us heal together the wounds of the offended peoples.

The union of diverse struggles for self-determination, yet unfinished, is a path built through many practical and symbolic acts of breaking with the past, which we can learn to incorporate into our daily lives whenever we have the opportunity.

As I asked in my opening remarks at the event hosted by Busboys and Poets: How is it possible that for decades we have been gathering in North America to talk about Palestine, without ever engaging the native people who lived—and still live—through colonialism and genocide in those very lands?

So, a few days after that meeting in the bookstore, when I found myself presenting my report to the United Nations, I began my speech like this: “We gather today on the land of the Piscataway Nation, which still belongs to them,” and I saluted the land I had learned from Hope.

I was amazed at how little importance was given to this opening of my speech. It was of particular significance to no one to note that in that beautiful building where the official meetings of the United Nations are held, with its many floors and its imposing glass and steel facades reflecting the sky and the surrounding city, someone said: "Today we find ourselves on a land that belonged to a people – the Native Americans – who were the victims of a genocide, committed by one of the

permanent members of the Security Council." In those rooms, a palpable contrast pulsated between the supposed elegance of power expressed through concrete, and the earth beneath, marked by layers of history, suffering, and struggle, which lies forgotten.

No one is free until everyone is free. ***Everyone.*** All those who have been rendered invisible on this Earth; all the peoples whose memory, traditions, and culture have been reduced to folklore; all those who still hold the realization of freedom from oppression and want only as a horizon and not as a present. In America, there are now Native American museums, such as the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, where traditional clothing and reconstructions of tents are displayed alongside typical feather headdresses and wax reproductions of scenes from the era when the tribes lived their free lives immersed in nature and surrounded by buffalo. As for history, however, very little can be gleaned from the legends that accompany the various historical images. It almost seems as if the Native Americans became extinct on their own, and not because of a series of devastating policies and actions undertaken by the European colonies that settled in the "New World" starting in the sixteenth century. Then, starting in the seventeenth century, the outposts established by colonists and the progressive expansion of their domains for the exploitation of natural resources led to various conflicts with the native populations, who were often forced to cede their lands. Wars and the spread of European diseases, to which the indigenous people had no immunity, contributed to a dramatic population decline. This was compounded by policies of famine and forced removal, such as the infamous Trail of Tears in the 1830s, which led to the displacement and death of many Cherokee and other tribes.

Although many tribes are now federally recognized, life on reservations remains very difficult. After surviving centuries of violence and the destruction of hundreds of tribes, Native communities still face serious challenges: access to natural resources is severely limited, and the U.S. government has never officially recognized the genocide—or rather, genocides—inflicted on Native peoples.

The lack of historical justice leaves the descendants of survivors in a fragile condition, forced to face daily challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and difficulty accessing essential services.

In Canada, there's a little more evolution than in the United States, since at least there the genocide is recognized. At all public events, it's customary to state that we're on lands that belonged to Native peoples who never gave up their land and culture. Homage is paid to them, their ancestors, and their leaders, past, present, and future. But we must ensure that this recognition isn't merely performative, and that there's a genuine commitment to eradicating discrimination against Native people. Let's not pay tribute in public, but then continue the policies of land and resource theft, as is happening in Canada, but also in Australia and New Zealand. And in Palestine.

When I think of Hope's introduction to our meeting at Busboys and Poets, I fear what might happen to Palestine if the current Israeli government's plan, supported by the Trump administration, were to come to fruition. Forty years from now, someone might find themselves in a place once known as Palestine, perhaps in a university lecture hall named after Donald Trump, paying tribute "to the Palestinians, the ancient inhabitants of this land," when Palestine will no longer be anything but a ruin.

This is why it is so important for us to fight together to understand, to know, to preserve memory, and to defend those who remain. This is

why human rights play an almost therapeutic balancing role: they remind us that we too are human, despite our position in power. We know well that, by nature, human beings are vulnerable, complex, and fractured. And this fragility is inevitably reflected in the colonizer, in whom we can often find a touch of the drama of the colonized. How can we forget the tragedy that struck Ireland in the mid-19th century, when in just under five years, approximately one million Irish people were killed by hunger, typhus, and cholera, while nearly two million were forced to emigrate?

Today, the descendants of those migrants comprise 20 percent of the white American population, which tells us that, as the Irish sought to rebuild their lives in America, they in turn contributed, knowingly or unknowingly, to the colonial system that existed in the North American region.

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I remember when I saw ***Avatar for the first time,*** in Jerusalem. I left the theater with a very clear thought: "What a turning point for Palestine, this film!" That story had it all: the invasion, the extraction of resources, the connection to the land, the resistance, the anchor of spirituality for the oppressed people.

Outside the cinema, I was struck by the many Israelis who left the theater crying. It took me a while to understand, listening and chatting with the bystanders, that they weren't crying because of what I had seen, but because they too felt part of the Na'vi people. They identified with the persecuted, with those driven from their homeland by an invincible and superhuman military force.

This opened my eyes to the fact that, as a result of centuries of persecution in Europe and Russia, many Israelis carry with them a certain type of memory of pain, just like the one Gabor Maté talks about: a form of emotional dissociation that may be unconscious, but which nevertheless leaves traces. Whether real or projected, it remains in the body, in language, in the imagination. Understanding this complexity, for me, makes the entire situation we are experiencing much less banal, less flat.

When people are called to commit to human rights, I think they should do so from a ***human,*** radical position: but also a radically open one, where there can certainly be right and wrong actions without needing to separate the "good" from the "bad." Therefore, it is possible to embrace everyone as human beings. ***Everyone.***

There is something deeply distorted in those who cannot recognize the humanity of the other.

For many Israelis, this means being unable or unwilling to see Palestinians as human beings. And the same is true, conversely, for those Palestinians who struggle to recognize the humanity of Israelis.

Fortunately, even if they are still few, there are Israeli citizens and Jews in the diaspora who are fighting vigorously for Palestinian rights. This is precisely the meaning of the motto ***"decolonize your mind":*** decolonizing the mind means breaking down borders and barriers, doing our best to free ourselves, on both sides, from the superstructures that prevent us from

staying in touch with what is most human and true we have in common, on this Earth we share and which, ultimately, is the only thing that truly matters.

“The great mother takes no side,” says Neytiri in ***Avatar.***
"She only protects the balance of life."

Preserving the humanity of others, striving to continue to see their uniqueness without normalizing or leveling, in itself means contributing to the fight against genocide. All colonizers and all instruments of genocide operate not only by physically killing people, but also by erasing the identity of a people.

What was the meaning of the number tattooed on people in concentration camps, if not this? Within that space, their name no longer had any meaning, and part of the struggle for survival consisted in the precious act of remembering who they were and who they had been, preserving a sense of what is highest in humanity even in the face of what proved otherwise.

Cordelia Edvardson, deported at the age of fifteen to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz under the number A3709, and later a Jerusalem correspondent for one of Sweden's leading newspapers for decades, as well as one of the first Jewish voices to denounce the atrocities committed by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people, spoke of her experience inside the concentration camp in her book, ***The Princess of the Shadows.*** Her stories, which evoke the memories of a young girl, little more than a child, clearly reveal how crucial it was for her to cling to culture, knowledge, and poetry in order to continue to see herself as a human being in the true and noble sense of the word. Thus, the story of Demeter and Proserpina—the princess who, like a seed, enters the shadows of the earth only to emerge at the right time with her flower and her fruit—is not only a beautiful myth, but a promise of rebirth that nourishes the heart by reminding us who we are, who we can be.

The organization of emerging Palestinian writers We Are Not Numbers also stems from the awareness that in theaters of war and extermination, victims are exposed to many risks, including the loss of identity under avalanches of statistical data, of counting the dead, which in places like Gaza have always been cyclical. The victims end up

no longer having faces, stories, or names; they become numbers in the war bulletins to which, day after day, people seem to become accustomed.

In 2015, in a Gaza already scarred by the siege, the poet Refaat Alareer, who has always believed in the power of words as a form of resistance and healing, wanted to overturn this logic by teaching literature, poetry and helping many young people in Gaza through the power of creative writing.

Along with other activists, writers, and organizations, Refaat was deeply committed to supporting We Are Not Numbers, with the goal of restoring the dignity of storytelling to the victims and survivors of every Israeli crime in Gaza, from the siege to the many wars. Through writing workshops, many Palestinian youth were able to share their lives, their dreams, what they had lost, and the remaining hope, enabling them to assert themselves as complete human beings, beyond the labels and numbers of the news.

Refaat Alareer was killed in an Israeli bombing on December 6, 2023, along with his brother, sister, and four children. The last surviving video of this professor, who loved Shakespeare, had learned Hebrew, and held the need to rehumanize Israelis as a cornerstone of his mission to his friends and students, lasts less than a minute. Refaat is visibly distraught and struggling with tears, but manages to keep his voice steady and clear as he says these words: "We know the situation is bleak, hopeless, with no way out. If there is no water, if we can't get out of Gaza, what should we do? Throw ourselves all into the sea and drown? Commit mass suicide? Is that what Israel wants? Well, we won't do it. The other day I was saying to some of my friends: I'm an academic; probably the most dangerous object I have in my house is a marker. But if the Israelis invade us, if they enter house by house to massacre us, I will use that marker, I will throw it at them, even if it is the last thing I can do in my life. This is how we all feel: in a state of absolute helplessness, with nothing left to lose." A few days later he died.

He was forty-four years old.

Today we can remember him by spreading, each one of us as we can, the knowledge of what is happening to the Palestinian people, because

Knowledge is crucial and memory is indispensable in every healing process, as Gabor Maté teaches us.

We can remember him with an excerpt from the preface to a book in which Refaat collected the stories of many Palestinian boys and girls, entitled ***Gaza Writes Back.*** Not ***Strikes Back,*** not ***Fights Back,*** but ***Writes Back.*** Gaza responds by writing. One can also respond to the atrocities suffered with the weapon of a story, or a marker.

> ***Gaza Writes Back*** because storytelling helps build identity and unity
> Palestinian nationalism. ***Gaza Writes Back*** because there is a Palestine that needs to
> be recovered, at least in writing, in its current state. Gaza tells stories because
> The narrative arc of a short story is enough to talk about Palestine. Gaza narrates so
> that people do not forget. ***Gaza Writes Back*** because the power of imagination is a
> creative way to build a new reality. ***Gaza Writes Back*** because writing is a
> national obligation, a duty to humanity, and a moral responsibility.

All Palestinians, and not only, love to remember Refaat with white kites: a tribute to his poem ***If I Must Die.***

> If I were to die,
> you have to live
> to tell
> my story
> to sell my things to buy
> some paper and some
> thread, to
> make a kite
> (white phallus with a long tail) so
> that a child,
> somewhere in Gaza,
> looking the sky in
> the eyes
> waiting for his father who
> he went away in a flame
> without saying goodbye to anyone
> not even to his own flesh

not even to himself

you see the kite, my kite

that you made, flying up

there and you

think for a moment that

an angel is there

to bring back love.

If I should die, let it

bring hope.

make it a story!

Conclusion

The vice of hope

I walk proudly,
I walk with my head held high.
I carry an olive branch in my hand
and the body on my
shoulders and I walk, and I walk.
My heart is a red moon
my heart is a garden full of
berries and basil.
My lips are a sky that sometimes drips fire,
sometimes love.
I carry an olive branch in my hand
and the body on my
shoulders and I walk, and I walk.

SAMIH AL-QASIM

It is when the world sleeps that monsters are spawned.

We already have plenty of monsters among us. First and foremost, our indifference.

As Mariame Kaba, an African-American educator and activist, says, hope is a discipline. And I would add that hope can, and should, also become a predisposition, a habit: something we consider indispensable and to which we are so deeply attached that we cannot do without it, beyond all logic or reasoning.

Although doing so isn't always as easy as saying it.

February 2025. I returned home to Tunis after a difficult experience in Germany. Between the fear of being arrested, and therefore having to stay away from my family for who knows how long, and the awareness of the gravity of what was happening in Europe, I felt an internal turmoil I don't think I'd ever felt before. I felt like I was in a state of post-traumatic stress, and perhaps I really was. The fact is, my nerves were on edge, I snapped at everything, I found myself arguing with my children, raising my voice over trivial things. It wasn't me. My own family looked at me without seeing me, without finding me.

Then something very strange happened. While my husband had picked up the children and taken them out for a walk, and I continued pacing around the house like a caged lion, trying to regain my composure, a small book caught my attention as I passed by the bookcase in my bedroom. ***Peace Is Every Step,*** by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Without even realizing it, I began to leaf through it and was struck by it, as if those pages had suddenly begun to speak to me. If they read it, many of my closest friends probably wouldn't understand my enthusiasm, given that it uses such simple, essential language that it could perhaps be mistaken for simplistic content. But for me, those words struck a chord precisely because they were so clear and spoke to me of something that at that moment was both impossible and necessary: the idea of restoring ***within myself*** that peace for which I fight every day. Reminding me that first of all, you have to ***be*** the changemaker if you want to make it, and that you can't change anything unless you change yourself in some way; that you can't work for world peace if you don't first have inner peace, if you aren't a true peacemaker.

It's a concept that's quite familiar to me, and even dear to me, at least in theory. In fact, reading that book, I was reminded of a speech I gave in 2023 at the opening of the Peace March in Assisi, where I'd been invited by peacemakers, and I'd said more or less exactly this: "If we don't start with ourselves, what are we left with? Peace is built with peace, not by thinking about war, so we must change the way we live and see things. Why are kids taught ***conflict management*** instead of ***restoring peace?*** Because conflicts

Should they be managed rather than avoided? What happened to diplomacy? Where did it go?

But bringing peace into our everyday lives, turning that hope into our vice, is the greatest of challenges: and in this—as the little book that providentially caught my attention on that difficult day explains so well—there is not and cannot be any distinction between our political activity and our living in this world.

Thich Nhat Hanh's words made me think a lot.
What were the steps I was taking on my living room floor at that precise moment? How furiously, how violently was my foot pounding the earth that supports me? For the first time in many, many days, I remembered my yoga practice and took a deep breath. I let my shoulders fall onto the couch, closed my eyes for a moment, and then went back to reading.

> When I lived in Vietnam, a good part of our villages were bombed. Along with the brothers and sisters of my monastic community I had to decide what to do.
>
> We had to continue practicing in our monasteries, or leave the meditation halls. To help the bombing victims? After careful consideration, we decided to do both: to come out to help people and to do so while remaining mindful. We called it "Engaged Buddhism." Mindfulness must be committed. After seeing, we must act. Otherwise, what's the point of seeing? We must become aware of the problems plaguing the world. Then, this awareness will help us understand what to do and what not to do to make ourselves useful. If we maintain our attention on our breathing and continue to practice smiling even in difficult times, many people, animals, and plants will benefit from our actions. Massage our Are you planting seeds of joy and peace with Mother Earth every time you touch her? I try to do so with every step, and I know Mother Earth appreciates it deeply. Peace is every step. Are we ready to continue the journey?

Peace is also ***mindfulness:*** being aware of what you're doing at any given moment. When we eat, when we move, when we think, when we're with our children. How many times do we lose presence in every action of our day? How many times do we rush around pointlessly or get distracted by something that...

Is it apparently more important than what we're doing? These are the questions that little book brought me back to, even simply inviting me to take a few breaths without panting, focusing my attention on the air entering and leaving my body.

At that moment, I remembered an evening a few years ago, when I was in Rome attending a conference. At that time—it was December 2023—the genocide was already underway, and faced with the outpouring of my fear, when I said: "One day there will be peace in Palestine, but at what price? I'm terrified of what will come after, because, with everything the Palestinians are suffering in the West Bank and Gaza, I can't imagine the violence that could be unleashed against the Israelis," a man in the audience raised his hand, asking to speak.

It was Wasim Dabash, an Italian-Palestinian professor of history at La Sapienza University, who replied: "No. There will be no violence. If all this stops, when it stops, if there is no more violence, there will be no more violence. Because we Palestinians are not driven by a thirst for revenge, but for justice. From '48 until today, we have tried, as before, to return to Palestine and live in peace. And it's clear that there have been reactions to oppression, acts of resistance, when the cup was truly overflowing. But most Palestinians have never taken part in violent acts against Israelis. For almost all of us, being religious doesn't mean being bigoted; it means having God within, that is, a love of life, honoring both what remains and what has passed as something to be brought into this life, and not as something one might want to die for."

For me, it was a profound revelation, allowing me to understand that even there, at that conference, I had, without even realizing it, brought my Western lens, accustomed to thinking in terms of the law of retaliation. The words of that wise professor, however, reassured me, and also taught me something important about the meaning of hope.

Something I hope I've also conveyed to those who have read this book, giving them food for thought that each of us can be a spokesperson and bearer of that hope, learning day after day to adopt it like a posture, a good habit we can no longer do without.

You can be a journalist, a baker, a lawyer: it doesn't matter what you do, but ***how*** you do it, how you present yourself. Because—as Thich Nhat Hanh writes—what's the point of seeing, if not acting?

So I hope that whoever reads these pages, now that they have met the people who taught me to open my eyes to see more clearly and to take action for Palestine, will take away the idea that they can be a light, always, in any corner of the Earth.

Francesca Albanese, March 2025

Thanks

At the beginning of this book, I said I had chosen ten people as focal points for my stories, since from each of them I learned something essential about Palestine. The first is Hind; the second is Abu Hassan; the third is George; the fourth is Alon; the fifth is Ingrid; the sixth is Ghassan; the seventh is Eyal; the eighth is Malak; the ninth is Gabor.

The tenth is Max. My life partner, the person with whom I first set foot in Palestine, and the one with whom I decided to leave Palestine, three years later. But Palestine is like this: you can choose to leave it, but for those who have been there, seen it, and lived it, it will not leave you. My life is proof of this.

In the early days, when we moved to Jerusalem, Max and I traveled extensively, constantly moving in search of an understanding of that land, and paradoxically, it was as if we couldn't see its borders. Wandering around historic Palestine, we visited Nazareth, the Galilee, the coastal area, from Haifa to Jaffa, and then the south, the desert. All of this is now part of the State of Israel. Moving through that land, we learned to familiarize ourselves with its wounds. Visible wounds, carved in stone. On Sundays, we would go walking together in the forest surrounding the city, on the hills surrounding Jerusalem, which are also now part of Israel. The forest beneath which lies the village of Ein Karem, with its square stone houses nestled among citrus trees and jasmine. On those walks, we got to know many friends who have remained with us for a long time, and there we began to understand what the Palestinians meant when they said: "Even the stones here tell our story." Walking in the forest, for example, one often came across the ruins of houses and fragments of masonry. These were the remains of Arab villages that were depopulated and destroyed during the Nakba in 1948, and

upon which carpets of trees have been planted. Many are a gift from Diaspora Jews to the State of Israel, which projects itself to the world as a beacon, a hearth, for all Jews.

We discovered that land little by little; and some time after we moved into East Jerusalem, protests began in Sheikh Jarrah, right in the area where we lived, on a hill in a beautiful yet devastated part of the city. But all of East Jerusalem is a disaster, with Palestinians paying sky-high taxes but receiving minimal services in return; garbage collection and electricity account for only 13 percent of their income; we also paid a very high municipal tax. Around and across the street lived many Palestinian families, like our friend George's, and many were evicted from their homes literally before our eyes. Meanwhile, settlers were arriving, supported by organizations like Ateret Cohanim, the Elad-Ir David Foundation, and the Israel Land Fund, who launched full-blown legal battles against Palestinian residents, presenting dubious property titles dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Yet the Israeli courts accepted those titles, allowing the eviction of Palestinians who, having nowhere else to go, ended up in the small houses built by UNRWA, the United Nations Refugee Agency, on land that was administered by the Jordanians from 1949 to 1967. We witnessed dramatic scenes: families evicted, even in the middle of the night, by police who threw out kitchens, tables, and beds. Some Israelis came to protest, but they were very few. The Palestinians, for their part, wanted not just protests, but concrete action, especially from Jewish Israelis: those who vote. From those who have rights in Israel, and cannot believe that simply protesting once a week with tambourines and banners in Sheikh Jarrah is enough. This was what the Palestinians openly said when they refused to join those protests in 2010. So, we too found ourselves caught up in the roar of the demonstrations, in which Max actively participated (I didn't; my work with the United Nations prevented me). And that's how Max met many peace activists in Tel Aviv: some of them have remained friends, even though it's now become impossible to see each other again.

After years of knowing each other and talking about many things, it was there in Jerusalem that I saw the full emergence and putting into practice of

Max's political and combative spirit. This aspect of him struck me, because he showed himself to be someone who throws himself into things firsthand, with his refined intellect, a true thinker, above all else. He shared my intolerance for injustice; in fact, he often accompanied the Israelis of Ta'ayush, an organization that works as a mediator between settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank, physically accompanying Palestinians in their daily activities—like cultivating the land or herding their animals—to protect them from attacks, document any abuses, and act as a deterrent to violence.

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Often, on Fridays, he joined them, or participated in the protests in Ni'lin and Bil'in. One day, he returned from a visit to an olive grove with a basket full of black rubber balls. I'd never seen anything like them: they were tear gas canisters fired by the Israeli army at the protesters. "Christmas is coming. We'll decorate the tree," he told me in his usual mocking tone.

Max could write a book simply about the years we spent in Jerusalem, about his experience with the Israeli peaceful resistance movement. He saw in that movement the essential seed of something destined to travel for a while on two separate and parallel tracks, one for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis, who still had a long way to go before merging.

For many Israelis, the privilege they must give up in order to welcome the Palestinians as a free people is too high a price to pay.

I remember wonderful moments of my life in Jerusalem. We had so many landmarks in the city: our favorite falafel, the Educational Bookshop where Max met George, and even now the owners remember my husband, because he held online meetings upstairs and when he spoke, only his voice could be heard! Yet the time in Jerusalem was truly difficult for me. It was very hard for me to live immersed in apartheid. Jerusalem, like the rest of the West Bank, is a dystopian city.

Every time someone came to visit us, we ended up reliving the ordeal of the occupation. Where did we take our guests? Certainly not to Tel Aviv or Nazareth. No, we took them to see the epicenter of the occupation: Jerusalem, the Old City and the part cut off by the wall, Bethlehem scarred by the wall, Hebron invaded by violent settlers, the

Bedouins displaced everywhere from the Jordan Valley, and then Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem, the Balata camp. How many of our friends and relatives who came to visit us changed their minds about Israel and Palestine... Some arrived with fairly biased opinions from the outset, staunchly defending Israel and with no sympathy for the Palestinians, whom they viewed as troublemakers and "terrorists." No one returned to Italy with the same opinion about Israel. Some of our friends had truly hysterical reactions: "What do I care about coming to Hebron? I didn't come here to see these monsters! Why are you taking me where all these soldiers are! I'm scared, surrounded by all these armed people! I'm scared! You're not normal!"

After a couple of similar incidents, we eventually reduced the number of people we were transporting to the occupation hotspots. However, Max and I continued to visit Palestine.

We've even found our own niches of relief, even amid the ongoing colonization. For example, Sebastia, a small village nestled in the hills of the West Bank, a few kilometers from Nablus.

Arriving, a landscape opens up before your eyes, dotted with Roman columns, the remains of temples, an amphitheater hidden among the olive trees, a Crusader basilica now in ruins, and in the center of the village, among the stone houses, what according to tradition is the tomb of John the Baptist.

That magical place was our refuge, with its Roman ruins and the old city largely restored by an Italian-Palestinian couple of architects, who had created the first form of widespread hospitality Max and I had ever seen. I remember the guest house and the little house where mosaic courses were held, nestled in the heart of the small village. The Palestinian residents couldn't do much, because the entire area was under Israeli control, which prohibited any development or redevelopment plans. However, the Palestinian-run part of the village had been transformed into a network of welcoming little houses, a vanguard of entrepreneurial resistance. We made our last trip there before leaving Palestine. I was five months pregnant with Leila.

Now, when I think of Sebastia, my heart sinks, because Israelis are destroying it.

I also remember the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip in 2014, in which two thousand people died, including over five hundred children.

We were in Washington. I spent hours with Leila clutched to my chest, reading the news coming from Gaza. So many UNRWA colleagues killed, so much destruction! It seemed unimaginable to us at the time.
And right around that time, it was Max who encouraged me to say yes to the proposal my former colleague Lex Takkenberg had been making for two years: to write a new book on Palestinian refugees with him. "Don't worry," Max told me. "If you find the funding, great. If not, never mind. Focus on something useful, something that helps. Because it's really important to better understand the Palestinian refugee issue."

I was full of doubts, but that's when I said to myself: “You know what?
Let me think about it for a moment. I actually don't know how to write a book, but I'll figure it out, I'll learn it."

Max was incredibly supportive during that time, even during the preparation of the book, when, with my somewhat obsessive-compulsive nature, I felt like I couldn't let go of this creature that was growing alongside my children, taking up so much of my time and space, such an enormous amount of mental energy. Much of that book was written between Washington and Indonesia. Our friends used to joke: "It's easier to see Francesca without her children than without her computer."

It must be said that I have never been very good at setting boundaries between work and private life, and the barriers completely broke down when I began my mandate as UN Special Rapporteur in 2022.

At first, it was really difficult for our family life. Up until that point, and despite having a demanding job that required me to travel frequently, I had always taken care of the children —from school to pajamas—the house, and everything we shared, from grocery shopping to vacations. Suddenly, I was no longer capable of taking care of much beyond myself.

The first summer we spent in Sicily was dedicated to the report on self-determination, retreating to write on the terrace of the Lido dei Ciclopi while Max and the children bathed and enjoyed the cuddles of relatives and friends. The second summer was similar, with interviews with Palestinian children in preparation for the report on childhood.

And then October 7th came, taking away the world as we saw and experienced it before, completely and suddenly. For the first time, we had managed to take three days off with the children in a

resort near Tunis, after submitting my report on minors. I had just returned from London, where I had given an important lecture marking the twentieth anniversary of Edward Said's death (for which we had chosen a poster illustrated by Malak Mattar, the same artist who painted the painting on the cover of this book). I remember that chilling morning, when we were awakened by incessant phone calls that forced us to get out of bed and fiddle with the remote control to connect to Al Jazeera. Sitting in front of the television at six in the morning, trying to understand what had happened, we were both speechless.

"What did they do? How many people... How many children did they kill?" I remember from those first hours the teeming shock, the lack of full understanding of what was happening, the fear for what was and what would be, the pleas for Max to remove the children from the room. By nine o'clock I had regained control of the situation, I was on the phone nonstop and had begun answering journalists' requests. The first words uttered in those days, which I still feel echoing heavily within me, were: "I hope the world can embrace Israelis and Palestinians with a spirit of compassion and common sense. May they both find themselves in this moment of acute pain and understanding of the other's trauma." Unfortunately, no one on the political spectrum accepted them.

Meanwhile, Max and I continued to experience everything together, including everything related to Palestine.

Over the past year and a half—the era of the genocide—Max has changed again, taking full control of the family and becoming my number one support system. It's true, at first I'd get a few jabs like, "Look, I have a job too," or, "You're never around anyway," when I missed the kids' school, for example. Over time, however, he's changed a lot. Sometimes he gets angry because I work too much, because I never set limits on anything or anyone. But he always supports me. Even when he thinks my tweets are too provocative. In fact, it's always Max who sometimes tells me, "Go ahead, go ahead with your ***wedges,*** because when you're brutally honest, people love you even more."

So I'm grateful to him for his support.

And I also thank him for his economic analysis and for what he's written about Palestine. I don't forget that, in one of the last reports my predecessor, Michael Lynk, wrote for the United Nations, in 2021, when he didn't even know I existed, he heavily criticized the World Bank for having aided the normalization of the Israeli occupation. He added, however, that the only World Bank report worth mentioning was the one on the costs of the West Bank occupation for the Palestinian economy, the first one Max had worked on when he joined the World Bank in 2012.

Thank you, Max, for always being full of ideas. Thank you for being kind and generous, and because it wouldn't make sense to me to talk about Palestine without you.

For the tears you have collected over these past years, and for those you have helped me not to shed, with your strength and incendiary wit. Thank you for supporting me through these difficult years, always encouraging me to persevere, even in the face of the horror of death which, though physically distant, has oppressively swept over our lives, tormenting our nights for long months. Thank you for the many times you have helped me transform sadness and anger into determination, allowing me to act decisively, never backing down. I thank you for helping me see, understand, and begin to expose to others the ***mafia-like*** nature of the system we are fighting together, in order to build a present we need not be ashamed of and to avoid destroying, or further mortgaging, the future of our children and other children, who are still children.

Thanks also to all the beautiful souls I've met over the years, too many to name: I carry you with me. To my team of tireless "peacebuilders": Sara Troian devoted herself wholeheartedly to my mandate for two years, the first two, so uncertain but crucial. I love you, Sara, and I'm happy to know you're elsewhere doing wonderful things. To my closest collaborators, those without whom much of what we see on the outside would not be possible: Melissa O'Donnell, a pillar of support for me since the disastrous months when the genocide began; Amal Loubani, whose patience and kindness are second only to her stubborn dedication to her work; and ***last but not least*** Teresa Rasella, who is everything a guardian angel can be. To the three of you, I say: I don't have all the words to thank you. Just keep moving forward, the road is still long.

To the researchers, to my university colleagues, above all Nicola Perugini of the University of Edinburgh, who together with Luigi Daniele of the University of Nottingham is a sort of Merlin the Wizard, constant inspiration and support.

Thanks to Palestinian civil society, both under occupation and in the diaspora—there are too many of you, but I thank you all—and, in Israel, to Amos Goldberg and Itay Epshtain. Daniel Levy is no longer in Israel, but for me he represents the best part of it.

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